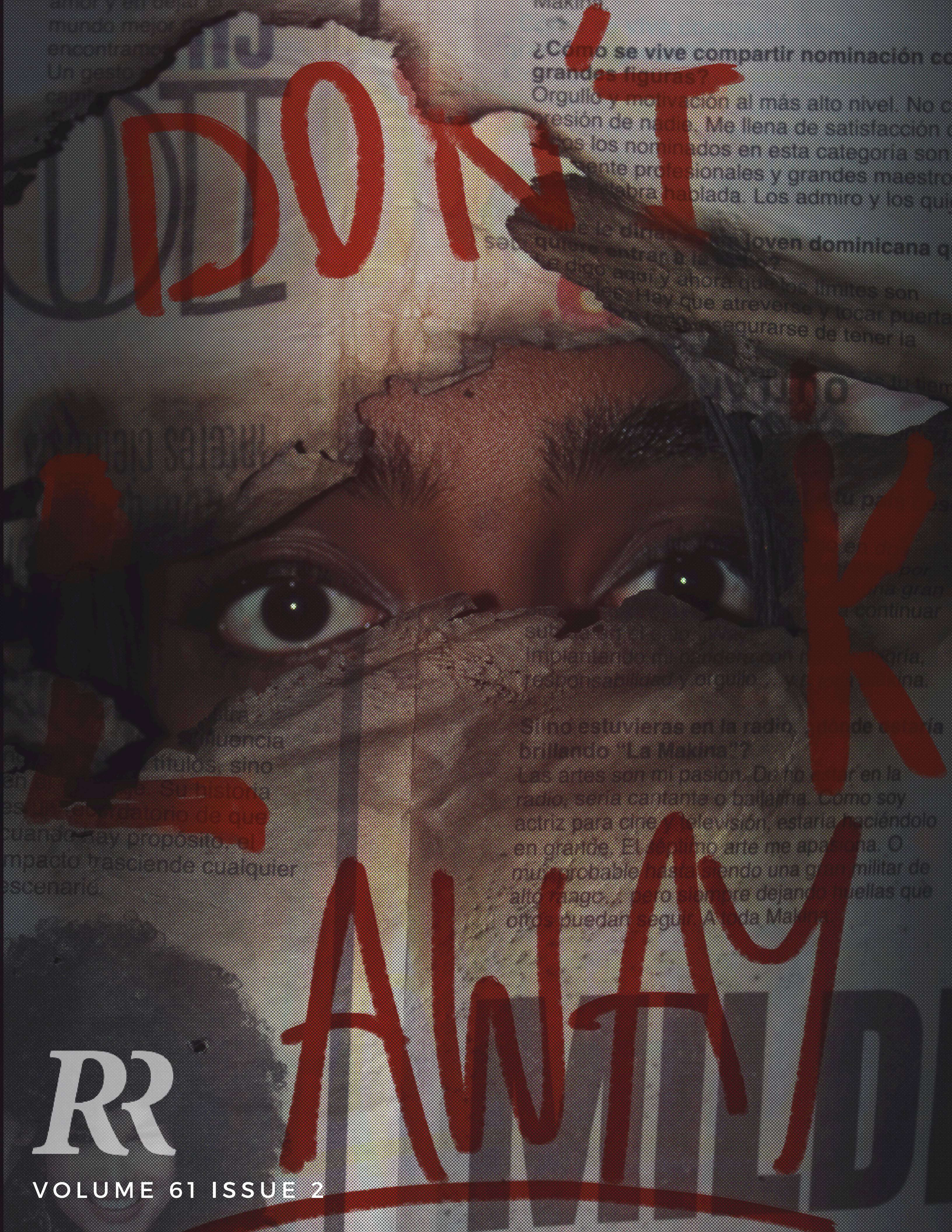
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VOLUME 61 ISSUE 2

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

There are a number of things we instinctively look away from: bright lights, painful headlines, even parts of ourselves we don't yet want to understand. It's a form of protection. But what if that instinct doesn't always serve us? In this issue, we decided to ask the question: what happens when you don't look away?

In an age of distractions, it's easy to hide from what matters, and constant information makes avoidance tempting. What's important to remember is that looking away isn't a weakness– it's a reflex.

Consider how, when you step into bright light after being in the dark, it hurts your eyes at first. Your instinct is to squint to make the adjustment more gradual. You may even shield your eyes with your hand. Reliance on these crutches is natural, but your eyes won't adjust if you never let the light in.

Looking away from politics means further injustice. Looking away from ourselves means remaining stuck.

So if looking away carries so many consequences, why do we still do it?

Because it's hard to face what hurts.

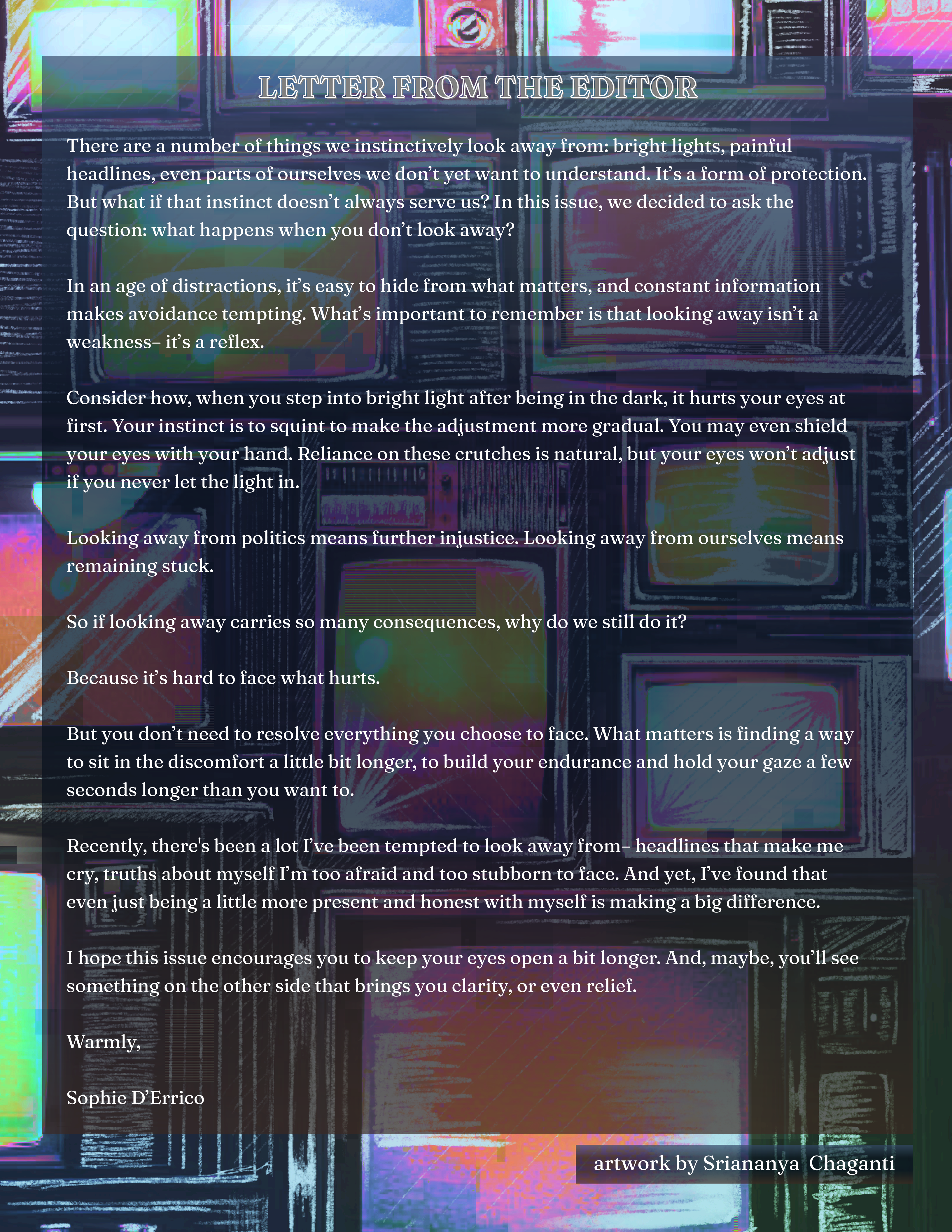
But you don't need to resolve everything you choose to face. What matters is finding a way to sit in the discomfort a little bit longer, to build your endurance and hold your gaze a few seconds longer than you want to.

Recently, there's been a lot I've been tempted to look away from– headlines that make me cry, truths about myself I'm too afraid and too stubborn to face. And yet, I've found that even just being a little more present and honest with myself is making a big difference.

I hope this issue encourages you to keep your eyes open a bit longer. And, maybe, you'll see something on the other side that brings you clarity, or even relief.

Warmly,

Sophie D'Errico



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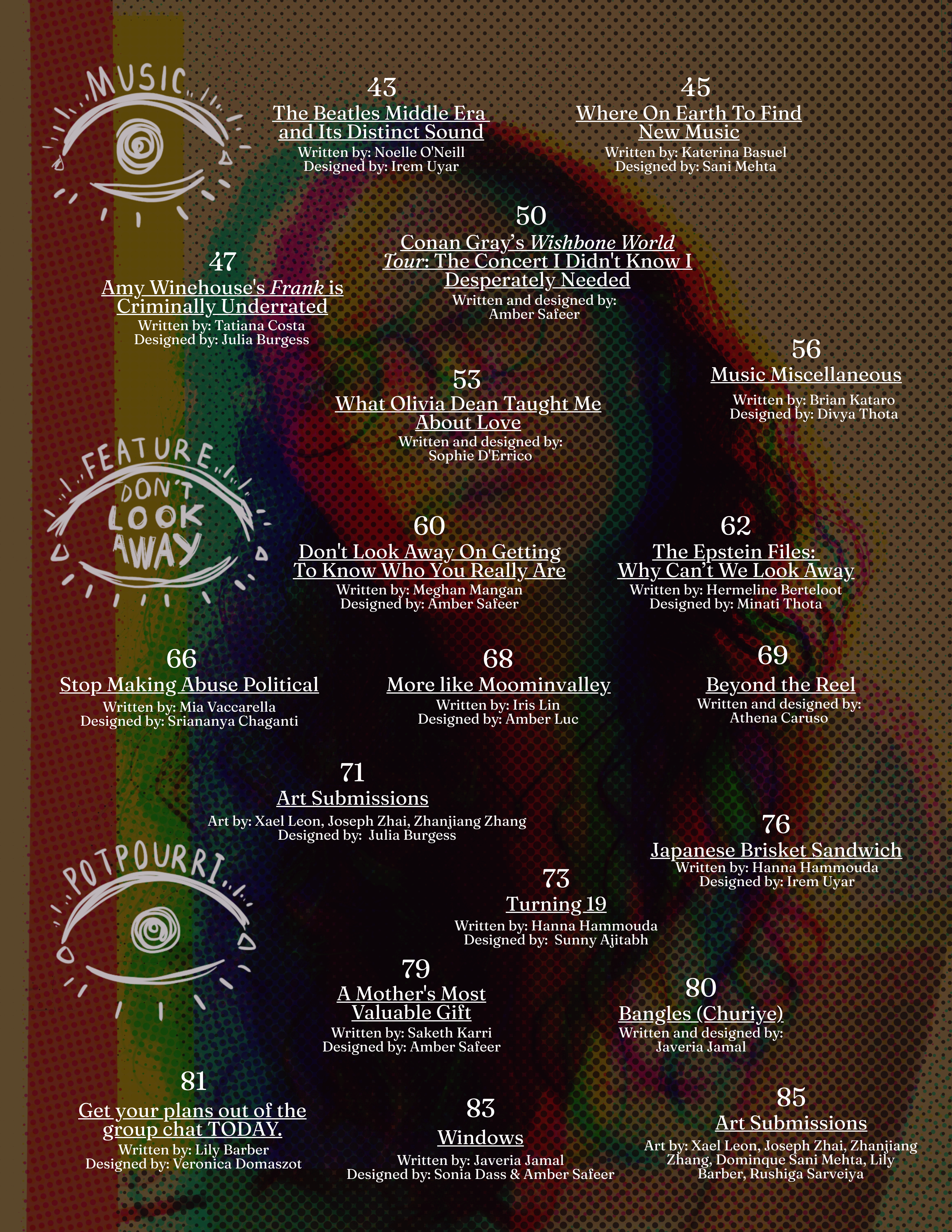

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photo by Amber Safeer

FINDING COMMUNITY IN FAKE COMMUNITIES

BRIAN KATARO

Growing up, I was a key part of my local town. I was the new kid, but made it my mission to introduce myself to everyone I possibly could, build connections, and even take part in local festivals. Looking back, I was surprised at the extent that I was able to be involved while being so young. Given all of the residents were talking animals, but still...

I'm far from the only one to have spent my days in a virtual town full of virtual folks; there are entire fanbases and communities built around the experiences that *Animal Crossing*, *Stardew Valley*, *Harvest Moon*, and many others have to offer. They fall into the recently exploded "Cozy Farm Sim" subcategory of games, usually centering around a little plot of land and small everyday tasks with progression in both a town and the relationships with the people in it. *Stardew Valley*'s Pelican Town may be one of the most noteworthy instances, playing a strong role in reinvigorating the genre back in 2016 (ouch, my bones hurt). The indie title introduced the world to a tight knit local community, some magical junimo spirits, a plot of farmland, eligible romantic partners, and an evil corporation in Joja Cola.

The game was in many ways a spiritual successor to the earlier *Harvest Moon* (now *Story of Seasons*) series, which also left the player in the position of a newcomer to a farming town, getting to interact and integrate with the locals, learn about their daily tasks, mingle with the supernatural nature sprites and fairies of the land, herd livestock, and spend some good ol' fashioned hard work in farming.

It may prove to be counterintuitive at first, spending one's leisure away from the worries and tasks of everyday 9-5 life by clocking in a 5-9 at the local mines or farming field for a villager's favorite crop. However, these titles hold more than just an additional layer of work and tasks to complete for bits and pixels on a screen. Where these experiences really shine are in their interweaving with an almost ideallistic, regimented life with elements of fantasy and magic.

Take, again, *Stardew Valley* as an example. Every 11 minute day cycle allows the player a progressive exposure to the digital town and its inhabitants. You can chat up with Pierre at the general store while grabbing your seasonal collection of seeds and plants. Willy, the fisherman offers a beginner fishing rod and starts you off on the quest to capture many fish of the sea, while Robin and Marnie offer all the latest in terms of furniture and livestock, respectively. Come on down to the saloon on a Friday night to have all the locals gathered around for food and games, or attend one of the many town festivals to see everyone taking in the season or playing carney games.

While everyone has a regimented schedule for literally every day of their digital lives, it offers a sense of structure and comfort in the predictability of those schedules when compared to everyday life. There are no sudden illnesses, imposing fear of monetary stability, or any other immediate dangers to yourself. This trope carries on to these other titles as well; while Tom Nook may always be selling your home upgrade for steeper and steeper costs, he imposes a no-interest forever loan on your home's construction, leaving you ample time to chat with the other animal-folk, collect fruit, and amass your ideal furniture catalog. The elements of fantasy also feed into the elements of pseudo-escapism; *Chef RPG* lets you take on the role of a restaurant owner, fighting monsters and growing crops for ingredients in a world of androids, and the earlier mentioned titles all have elements of magical or mystical nature, usually rewarding you for taking an interest in melding with the local townsfolk and wanting to contribute to the town.

I mean, how could one not after getting to know these people? While starting out as an outsider, you slowly become friends with the locals and learn more about the town's dynamics and relationships. There's the pang of sadness when hearing of Tom Nook's need to build himself up in youth to be able to care for his twin boys Timmy and Tommy, or the warm feeling of growing the local community in *Stardew Valley* (or signing your soul away to Joja). Characters have their own cutscenes and growth within their scripted lives, and develop a cast of emotions and personas to interact with. You have the opportunities to befriend or even date in some titles as well; leaving you not as some blank shell to control, but allowing you to project your own senses of style and integration with these NPCs.

I'd like to think that these life-sims, as with any other forms of media, stretch beyond just the lines of code that make up their programming. These games can immerse people from a wide range of backgrounds, ages, and locations all in the same localized town square with neighbors from all around. Especially in moments of isolation or finding oneself in uncertain circumstances, these experiences can offer moments of community and comfort -- oftentimes bleeding into the real world as well. I can assuredly say that I've found a great community of friends when bonding over these titles, or even seeking out local community organizations and events when I'd never dived into them before. It never fails to bring about some new and familiar faces, and make myself feel more intermingled with the folks around me. And maybe, just maybe, it lets me achieve my lifelong goal of simulating paying off my student loans in full from fishing and catching bugs.

A Guide to Princeton's Best Restaurants: A Love Letter to the Local Food Scene

By: Hermeline Berteloot & Justin Yang

New Jerseyans know that our state has one of the best food scenes on the East Coast. We also know that our Asian cuisine rivals that of New York and Philadelphia. Edison alone takes the cake for the best Asian restaurants in New Jersey. Aidan Icasiano and Amber Safeer's article *Hot or Not: A Comprehensive Guide to the Restaurants of New Brunswick (& surrounding areas),* published in last semester's issue, shares the best of the best when it comes to restaurants in the New Brunswick area. Now, it is our job as self-proclaimed food critics and connoisseurs to continue sharing some of the best restaurants in NJ, focusing this time within the Princeton area.

We are Hermy and Justin, high school sweethearts whose favorite shared activity is dining out. After four years of eating our way through our high school town together, we've now come to realize that we have our own unofficial ranking of favorite spots, and it would simply be unfair not to share them with loyal *Rutgers Review* readers.

Out of the many restaurants we have been to and loved, we have compiled a list – in no particular order– of our five favorite places. It goes without saying that this list is not definitive and simply a collection of the restaurants we keep going back to.

Nomad Pizza

Princetonians are known to argue about two things: ice cream and pizza. The only correct opinion for the former is clearly The Bent Spoon, and you may have already guessed that we believe that the correct answer for the latter is Nomad Pizza.

Set in the Princeton Shopping Center, Nomad Pizza offers a blend of classic finger food with a modern twist and higher-end atmosphere. The restaurant offers plenty of seating as well as an opportunity to see different parts of the pizza-making process based on where you're seated. Nomad's pizza crust is what truly sets this pizza place apart from all the other popular spots in Princeton, although we have to admit that it can be a hit or miss; it is fluffy yet crispy and not overly oily, which may not be for you if you prefer a classic, unassuming slice of pizza.

If the crust we described doesn't sound appealing to you, Contes is a cheaper classic pizza option. If you're in search of a not-too-expensive gluten and dairy-free option, Jules' Thin Crust may also be a better option, as Nomad's prices are definitely on the higher end. However, if, like us, you prefer pizza that feels fresh and almost healthy, you will definitely want to drive over to Nomad Pizza after your stroll around downtown Princeton.

Cross Culture

Located in the Princeton Shopping Center, Cross Culture offers an array of delicious Indian staples. They offer a range of both meat and vegetarian entrees and are accommodating to different dietary restrictions, as most of their dishes can be made dairy and gluten-free.

We usually order takeout, but we have dined at the restaurant once before. They have a fairly big space that is nice and welcoming enough, though nothing out of the ordinary. If we order food to eat with Hermy's parents, our order usually includes a mix of the following: aloo ghobi, lamb rogan josh, chicken tikka masala, nann (both plain and garlic), chicken biriyani, and vegetable samosas.

While the prices can be a bit steep for college students, if you end up taking an outing with your parents (or their credit card), or feel like treating yourself to some delicious Indian dishes while observing Princeton locals doing their shopping out the windows, Cross Culture is the place for you.

Terakawa Ramen

A hop and a skip away from the town of Princeton lies a small strip mall next to the Princeton Junction train station. In it, you'll find staples such as Woo Ri Mart, PJ's Pancakes, and Tous Les Jours. For us, however, the standout is Terakawa Ramen, home to the best ramen in all of New Jersey.

Terakawa Ramen has a relatively shorter menu compared to other restaurants, but fear not, because each item on the menu is top-notch. We enjoy ordering the Terakawa Signature ramen, the quintessential bowl of ramen with a pork-bone broth made from scratch, and the perfect amount of sides and sliced pork. The broth is incredibly rich and is the true differentiator from other ramen shops. We also enjoy their rice ball, which is an onigiri with braised pork and spicy mayo as a dipping sauce, and the katsudon.

We truly believe Terakawa is the best ramen restaurant in the Princeton area, and that no other restaurants can compete. Terakawa is a must-try if you haven't already.

Lan Ramen

Located in the heart of Princeton, across from the library, sits Lan Ramen, a noodle shop that specializes in hand-pulled Chinese Lan Zhou beef noodle soup. Being hand-pulled, the noodles here are bouncy and have the perfect texture in your mouth.

At Lan Ramen, you really can't go wrong with any of the noodle dishes; they're all excellent. However, their other dishes are also to die for. Some of our staples are, in fact, not noodle dishes but entrees. Standouts include Ma Po Tofu, Flash Fried String Beans, Crispy Spicy Chicken, Eggplant Fries, Popcorn Chicken, and Triple Pepper Beef. They are also extremely accommodating to food intolerances, and can make many dishes gluten-free!

Prices at Lan Ramen are on average $1-3 higher than at competing Chinese restaurants, but we feel that, for the quality of food served, the food is easily worth the cost– and that Lan Ramen deserves its spot as our top pick for Chinese restaurants in Princeton.

Shu House

Shu House is a Chinese and Taiwanese restaurant located in Kendall Park, New Jersey. While it isn't in Princeton, it is not far away and reachable via car or for delivery. While unassuming on the outside, Shu House has garnered quite a reputation as one of the best Chinese restaurants in the area.

Some of our favourite dishes at Shu House are the Fu Ji Fei Pian (beef tripe in chili oil), which is as authentic as it gets, the Taiwanese Popcorn Chicken with its perfectly crispy crust, Thai Red Curry, Garlic String Beans, and Cumin Lamb. Our go-to order for two is typically Fu Ji Fei Pian, Thai Red Curry, and String Beans. Every dish at Shu House has incredible taste, and also very good value, as it's not directly subject to Princeton's inflated prices. Additionally, at the end of every meal, Shu House serves complimentary sliced oranges, which are always delightful.

MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO.

IS INDIVIDUALITY EVEN REAL?

~ Saketh Karri

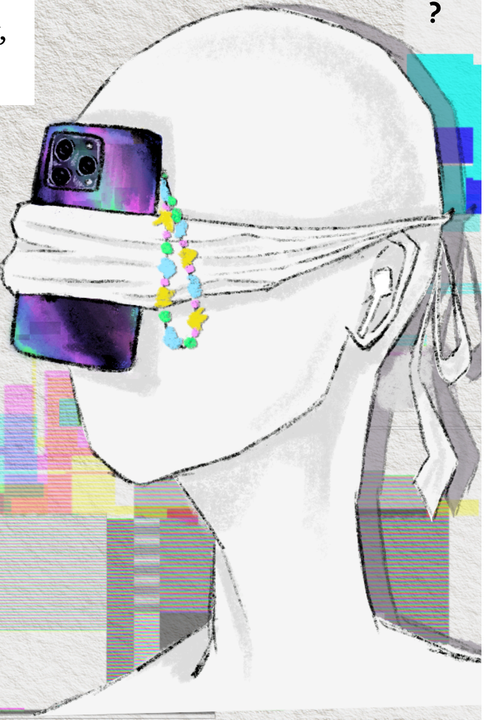
The wind moves her hair at the picture-perfect angle, the sun glinting off the gold necklaces she just thrifted. Her wired earbuds are connected to a vintage iPod that's looping niche indie artists with less than 10,000 monthly listeners on Spotify. She's different, but not in the way that makes her an outcast.

We live in an era that's obsessed with being unique. People want to be distinct and stand out from the majority, but only with traits that are idealized. Years ago, thrifting clothing was looked down upon by many people because it involved buying secondhand (a term that's now been rebranded as 'pre-loved') clothing. But with the rise of social media and hundreds of people posting that they've been finding cool clothing for a fraction of the original price, it suddenly became everyone's hobby. What was once belittled is now seen as a cool, niche hobby.

Don't get me wrong, I too am a victim of this irony. But it was only after I noticed how I was starting to lose sight of my true personality that I began to realize I was subconsciously replacing my individuality with things that society idealized. We are so determined to be unique that we are starting to forget what actually makes us ourselves.

The example about thrifting is just the tip of the iceberg. Individuality is no longer something that is unique, but instead something that has become idealized on social media so much that everyone wants to switch sides. Until recently, we were conforming to social norms as a society and now, we're encouraging everyone to stray from social norms in the same exact way (instead of "fitting in" to the majority, people now want to conform to the idealized group of society that the rest of us look up to). In this failed attempt to escape conformity, we ended up just making a new version of it.

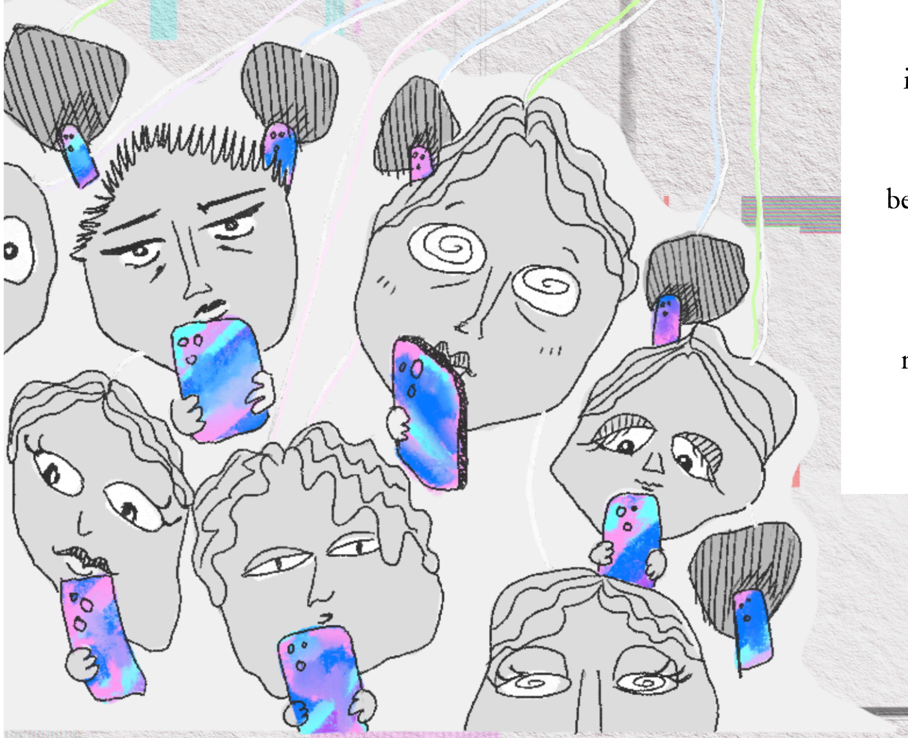
If you take ten minutes to scroll on any social media platform, I guarantee you that you'll come across a variety of different aesthetics. The office siren. The indie thrifter. The clean girl. The gym bro. The annotating bookworm. In a way, it's like we're playing a video game, waiting to select a preset personality before starting. You choose a template, customize ever so slightly, and then move on after a few months when it isn't cool anymore.



IS INDIVIDUALITY EVEN REAL?

This new face of conformity isn't just in the clothing we wear, or the music we listen to, but also in the words we speak. The meanings of emojis, phrases, and slang is constantly changing, and we change our vocabulary to remain relevant in the conversations we have. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's when we begin to speak in ways that contradict our beliefs and morals that it becomes an issue. People change political opinions to remain relevant in the comments section of a video that they're watching, and use language that was once seen as harmful or derogatory but is now "okay" simply because people on social media are using it.

There are so many nuances to this issue of losing ourselves in the midst of this new era of hidden conformity. Nobody wants to be labeled as basic, and we start to layer ourselves with pieces of personality we absorb from what we see on our phones, almost like a suit of armor to block out the possibility of being unique in an "uncool" way. If you look around, it's so evident. People pretending they've loved artists for years after they've finally gone viral, or taking up artistic hobbies simply because the social media influencer they follow made a video about it. This fear of being ourselves moves us toward imitation. We often justify it by saying that we're inspired by the things around us, but in reality we're just absorbing everything the algorithm feeds us. Would you still like that artist if they weren't popular on TikTok? Would you go thrifting if people still looked down upon it? Would you still use that language if other people aren't using it?



In this new era, maybe the best thing to do isn't absorb the next best aesthetic, but instead to introspect and think about what we actually like. Maybe the next best thing is to be undefined in these traits, rather than just doing something because other people are. The wind will still move your hair at the picture-perfect angle. The sun will still glint off your necklace, even if it isn't thrifted. The earbuds will still work, whether or not they're wired or playing niche music. Maybe it's okay to be boring sometimes.

EVERYONE WATCHES WOMEN'S HOCKEY

BY GABRIELLA ZEJAVAC

There is a clear, disproportionate line between different types of sports fans, mainly between women and men. Women find it a lot more difficult to get invested in such a male-centered interest that doesn't reciprocate that investment. Consistently, sports fans—especially women—are disappointed by the men that dominate the games they enjoy. The Olympics were no exception. After the controversy with Team USA's men's hockey team (centered around a phone call they shared with Donald Trump in which they laughed about *having* to invite the women's team to the State of the Union Address), many Olympic viewers lost that rare patriotism they had briefly felt watching their country's team win gold. Despite the women's team placing on the Olympic podium every year since their debut and also winning gold this year, they are constantly disrespected in their careers.

Because of how many women felt slighted and disrespected by this moment, a lot of hockey fans are attempting to promote interest in the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL). Since its inaugural season in 2024, the league has grown in popularity. Despite having started with only six teams, the PWHL now consists of eight teams and are still looking to expand as their viewership grows. The D.C. game—a part of their expansion tour—reached a record breaking crowd of 17,228. That record continues to be broken as the league gets closer to the playoffs. Despite what the general public seems to believe, there *is* an audience for women's sports.

Despite the exponential growth of the league, it's still relatively small at the moment compared to most other sports leagues. This makes now the best time to start engaging with the league. Even someone who never had any investment in sports (aside from picking out a favorite team) could easily begin following the PWHL.

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PWHL
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SARAH FILLIER
NEW YORK SIRENS

If I were to recommend which teams to support, I would suggest the Montreal Victoire, the New York Sirens, and the Seattle Torrent. The Victoire and the Torrent have some of the most talented players in the league (despite the Torrent being virtually unable to win a game), with many of them having participated in the Milan-Cortina Olympics. They also both have notable Queer players such as Marie-Philip Poulin, Laura Stacey, Hilary Knight, Alex Carpenter, and CJ Jackson—who are all some of my personal favorites. The Sirens are the most accessible of the eight, as they play their home games at Prudential

Center in Newark, New Jersey. Home game tickets are cheap and you can enjoy seeing talented players like Sarah Fillier and Kristyna Kaltounkova. I always recommend seeing any sports event in person because it's consistently more exciting to feel involved in a game and the Sirens (our home team) is the best way to do that.

When choosing a team, I always try to warn people not to jump on the bandwagon of the Minnesota Frost. Despite their monopoly over the Walter Cup (PWHL Stanley Cup equivalent), *many* fans of the league despise the Frost. This is almost entirely due to one of their players: Britta Curl-Salemme. Curl has quite a reputation for her alignment with conservative ideologies—mainly transphobia—so many fans, and even players, hold her in disdain.

On the other hand, the title of most beloved players definitely belongs to Marie-Philip Poulin and Hilary Knight. Poulin is the current captain of the Montreal Victoire and was the captain of Team Canada during the Olympics, while Knight is the current captain of the Seattle Torrent and was the captain of Team USA. Each of them are seasoned veterans of the sport and have consistently charmed the public. Aside from each of their immense talents, they both have beautiful love stories associated with hockey that many Queer women have a certain fondness for. Poulin met her wife (Laura Stacey) through the league and currently plays with her on the Victoire. Knight met her fiance (Brittany Bowe, a Team USA speed skater) at the 2022 Olympic games, had their first date in the Olympic Village, and got engaged at the 2026 Olympics. This high amount of positive Queer representation is what makes me feel most connected to the sport.

Aside from all the amazing players I get to watch, one of my favorite aspects of being a PWHL fan is that every game is free to watch on YouTube. It's always been difficult for many people to get into sports in such an active way due to the constant paywall involved with most of them. For the PWHL, you don't need a subscription to ESPN, you don't even need cable; you just need a screen and you can watch each game livestreamed by the PWHL YouTube channel.

With the continuous success of the NHL, there really is no reason the PWHL should be so unvalued. While men's players have an average salary of $3.5 million, members of the women's teams get paid only $58,000 on average. Even the highest paid PWHL players are paid about $100,000 while the lowest paid NHL players receive a minimum of $850,000. These talented players deserve the same respect as their male counterparts, and it all starts with growing the league. The more people watching the PWHL, the more these deserving players will be compensated, the more teams will be added to the league, and the more women will gain the respect they've more than earned.

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everything PROTEIN

fairlife nutrition plan
30g HIGH QUALITY PROTEIN
fairlife CORE POWER
ELITE CHOCOLATE
42g COMPLETE PROTEIN

By: Addison Dicang

Something that has piqued my interest for the past couple of months, maybe even the entirety of last year, is this new trend on everything protein related. Don't get me wrong, I love that companies are finding more ways to help people consume more protein in their diet. I won't even lie, I have even hopped on to the trend and been coerced by the marketing too. But, to an extent, has it become a little bit overkill? There are some examples I want to talk about that have made me ask:

Why specifically is it only protein? What about other nutrients, such as fiber? Do most people assume that a label containing "protein" automatically makes it healthy?

Back in late September of 2025, Starbucks released their new Protein Lattes and Protein Cold Foams. Every advertisement, whether on TV, social media, or even billboards, emphasized the word "protein". The drinks, at their most, pack a whopping 36 grams of protein.

Now, when I first heard this, I was astonished as to how that is even possible. All I saw on TikTok were reviews about the drinks. People would do taste tests and in mostly all of them, there were positive reactions.

This curiosity then caused me to try it out myself. I initially thought that it would taste absolutely disgusting. If you have ever tried anything high-protein related, it often tastes exactly like gritty, chalky sand. It is a blend of whey protein isolate and 2% milk. But to my surprise, the drink tasted nothing like protein; It tasted like an average Starbucks drink.

Another example is Fairlife Core Power Protein Shakes. This drink contains anywhere between 26 to 42 grams of protein for only 170 to 230 calories. Now this may seem like a healthier alternative to a typical morning coffee or breakfast, but the ingredients say otherwise.

Leading health and nutrition website *Eat This, Not That!* named Core Power Protein Shakes as the number one unhealthiest drink to consume. With factors ranging from gut irritation, artificial sweeteners, and various chemicals included, the drink was deemed less healthy than it was marketed. Not only this, but many more websites and videos explain why Core Power is more than what the protein label says.

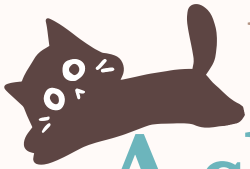
But still, whenever I go to Walmart or Target, I end up browsing the protein snack aisle. I immediately look for either the BUILT brand or Barebells, as I find that they mask the protein taste the best.

BUILT PUFF
BROWNIE BATTER

Going from someone who was skeptical at first to someone who always orders a high-protein drink at Starbucks, it got me thinking: Why do I keep ordering this?

I relate it partially to me being a trend hopper, but also to the added reassurance that the drink is "healthy". From my perspective, the whole "healthy" aspect is what pushes people to continue buying these high-protein products.

With products such as protein bars, shakes, chips, and much more, people assume that they are a healthier alternative to the original versions. But one look at the ingredients label makes me question if that is true or not.



by: Alyssa Perez

A short book to get you out of that reading slump

spoiler free!

Many people are revisiting their New Year's resolutions and a common type of goal is setting up a reading target. If you're anything like me, the number of books left to read is looking more daunting as the weeks pass by. Don't panic and definitely do not start adding a crazy amount of books to your shopping cart. (At least not yet!)

I always hear people talk about that one good book that did the trick and pulled them out of their slump. That book might be different for everyone, but here is one I strongly recommend even if you are used to a certain genre.

The book is titled *Before the Coffee gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi, translated from the original Japanese. It guides us through a cafe where anyone can travel back in time if they follow a set of strict rules. The promise of this book is that many people go to the cafe hoping to simply travel back in time, but with an additional nuance shaped by these guidelines:

1. **Only one specific seat in the cafe gives you the ability to travel back**
2. **Whatever happens in the past, the present does not change**
3. **You can only meet people who have also visited this cafe**
4. **You must return to the present before your coffee gets cold**

Customers who abide by these rules are granted the ability to travel back in the past. *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* is made up of four chapters, each following the story of someone who desires to go back in time. Every person's tale unfolds in a beautiful showcase of humanity as it follows topics of love, grief, and heartbreak. This book's restricted take on time traveling is so unique that it almost leaves you wondering: **Why would anyone go through all those hoops to travel back in time if nothing changes?**

The answer lies within the four short chapters that leave you thinking somewhat philosophically, while also feeling accomplished in completing the book. Let this mysterious blurb draw you out of your reading slump and into the basement of the Funiculi Funicula Cafe.

The book was originally published as a play. The message that this book leaves us with is that we cannot change the past, but we can look towards the future. At first, the plot seems confusing and maybe a little pointless, but as the book progresses you look forward to seeing how each character will use these wacky rules for their own personal growth. If you love this concept and want get out of your reading slump, the tale continues with four more short books in the series that I have added to my book collection.

TOW ZONE
NO STOPPING
ANY TIME
THE GREEN WAY

everything to know about introvert city

emily prohammer

Boston is a city that has followed me for four years now. What began as a simple college visit sparked my love for the quiet and intentional city. Even when I'm 200+ miles away, I see it in my cousin and my sister, who dance and compete there from time to time. I see it in my best friends from Massachusetts. I see it in strangers wearing the city name on their t-shirts and hoodies. I see it in my former best friend, who now lives there. Growing up in central Jersey (if you believe it exists), there were only two city options I had: New York City or Philadelphia. Both cities felt incredibly overwhelming and unsafe, leading me to believe that all cities were like this. Until I visited Boston for the first time.

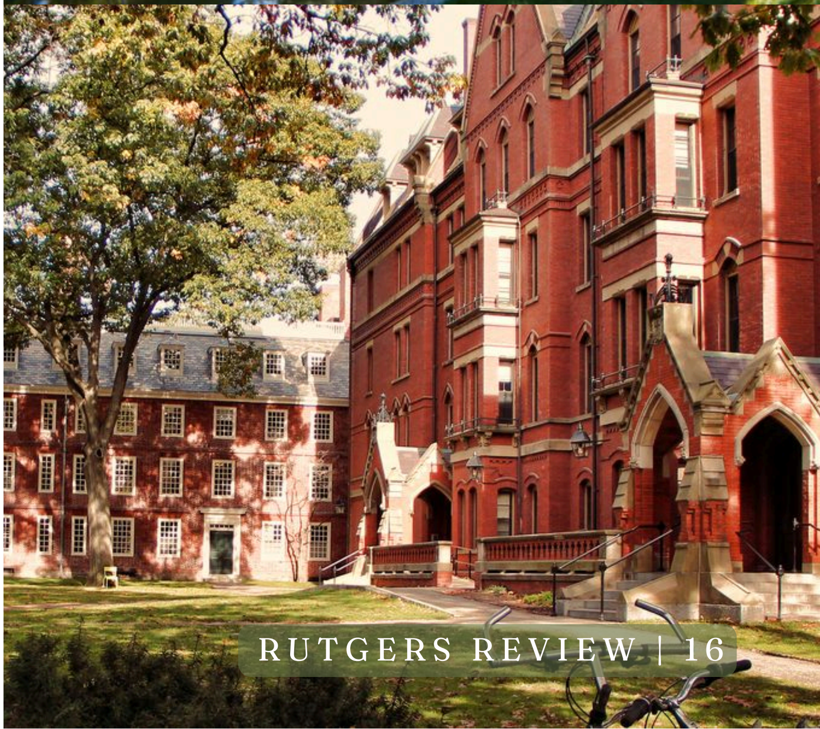
The atmosphere was the first thing that stuck out to me. While Boston is one of several cities known for having a very introverted population, that's not by accident. The architecture, walkability, and intellectual vibe of the city play a big role in this. Boston's most recognizable neighborhoods are made of red brick– buildings and sidewalks alike–, giving it a more historic and academic feel. The streets of Beacon Hill are most notable for this, with Acorn Street being among the most photographed for its architecture and cobblestone road. While the streets are narrow and packed like a typical city, there's a balance between buildings and nature that opens up the space. Boston also has some of the cleanest streets I've seen in a large city, which adds to the reserved and purposeful vibe.

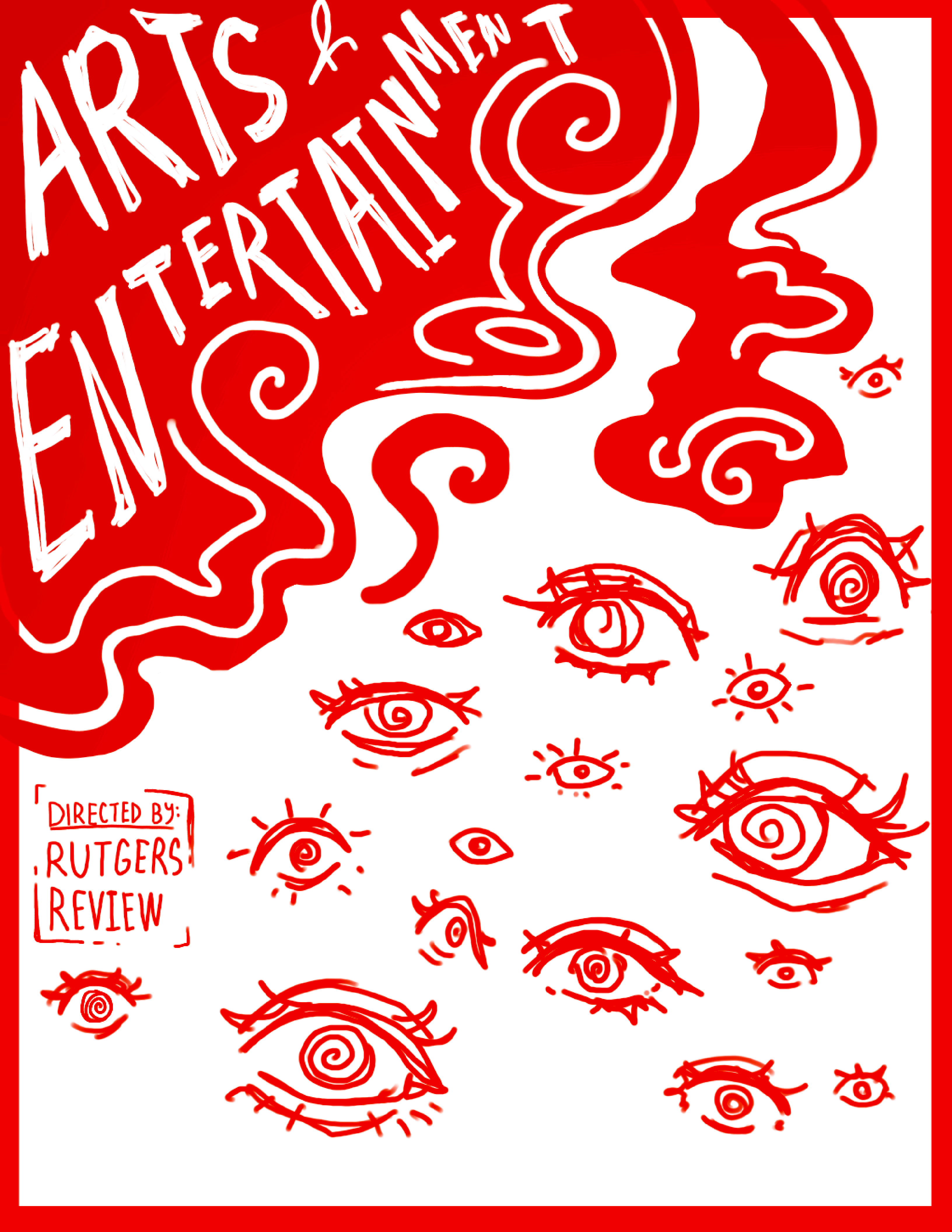
Back Bay does this best; it balances neighborhoods like Commonwealth Avenue with tree-lined streets, while also including stores and restaurants on Newbury Street. The result is a city that is structured and intentional by design.

Another major contributor is the number of third spaces: the cafes, parks, and other public gathering spots that exist outside of home and work. Some of these free-to-visit spaces include Boston Public Library, Boston Common, and Boston Garden. While BPL has a more academic focus, the Boston Common and Boston Garden offer plenty of nature, places to sit, sports fields/courts, and other events in the area. As for venues that you generally have to pay to visit, Trident Booksellers & Cafe on Newbury Street and Jaho on Huntington Avenue are great places to study, grab coffee with friends, and meet new people. There are so many more locations like these all around Boston with varying hours and vibes, so you're bound to find a space that suits you and your needs or expectations.

The Greater Boston area is also home to around 50 universities and colleges, which add to the city's intellectual vibe. The academic environment ranges from globally renowned institutions such as Harvard and MIT to smaller liberal arts colleges such as Emerson College. With such a high concentration of students in the city, most socializing is done in clubs, sports/hobby groups, or the previously mentioned third spaces. The reserved New England culture also plays a large role in how introverted the city feels. While New York is known for its landmarks and nightlife, Boston is known for its academic atmosphere and abundance of these spaces.

CHARLES ST
TRUCKS AND BUSES EXCLUDED

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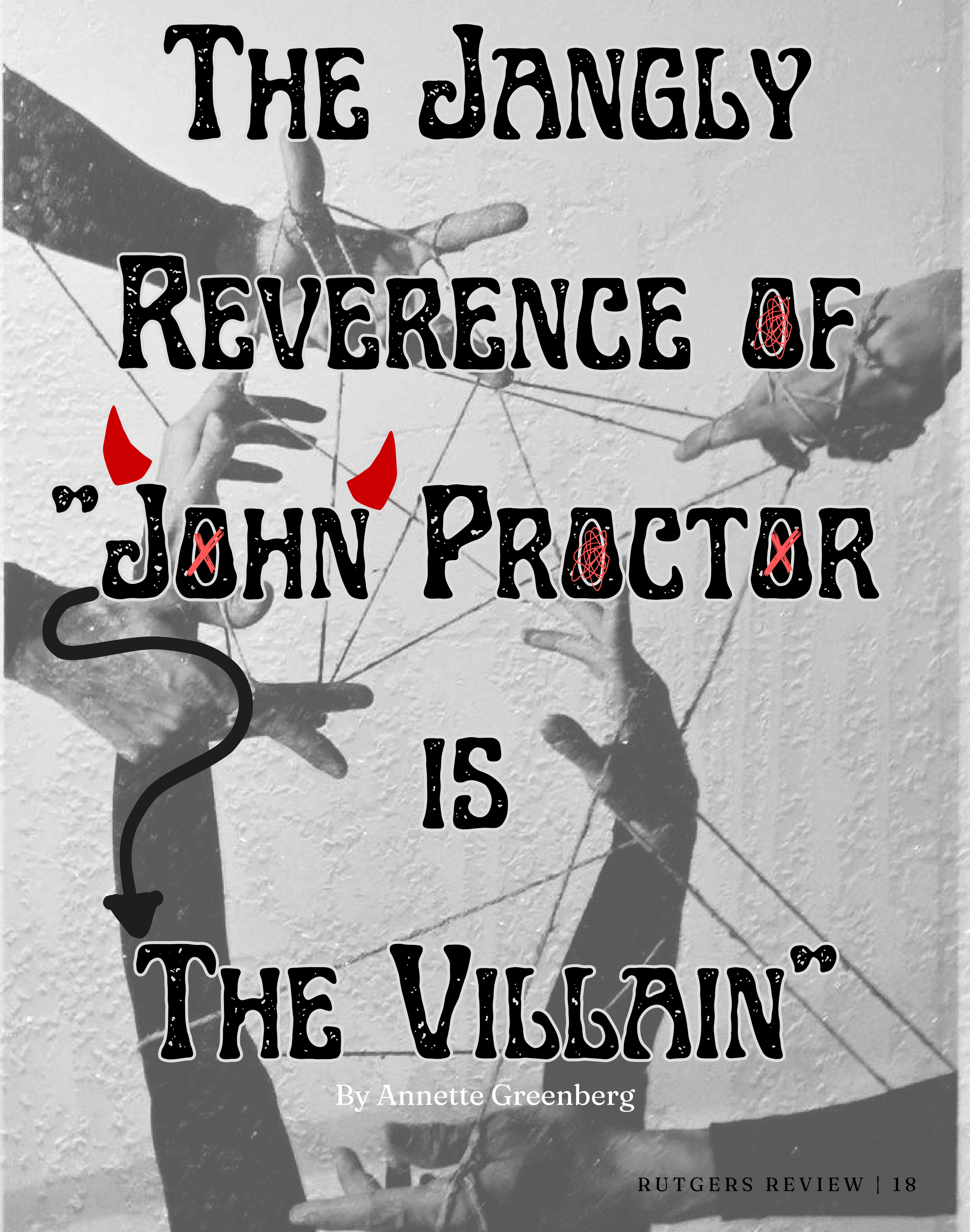


The Jangly Reverence of "John Proctor is The Villain"

By Annette Greenberg

Here are two things I've loved since high school: pop music and intertextuality. When I took the AP Literature exam, my Q3 analysis prompt was to examine a character's rebellion within the context of the chosen work as a whole.

A wave of nostalgia ran through me as I read the word "rebellion", and my laughable instinct was to write about *The Hunger Games*.

However, I knew that teen/YA texts did not count for scoring and the chosen text needed to be a "serious" one, so I wrote about *Never Let Me Go.* I wasn't disappointed. I was proud of that essay as well. I loved Ishiguro just as much as I loved Taylor Swift and the *Hunger Games* franchise when I was seventeen. In fact, I'd previously written an AP Lang practice essay using the lyrics of Swift's *All Too Well*. Academic depth and pop frivolity seemed easy to blend.

MOMENTS
MR SMITH

Teenagers think in extremes, no matter how much they're advised not to. They're harsh and messy and volatile in a way that's often difficult for adults around them to stomach.

In Kimberly Belflower's play *John Proctor is The Villain*, which closed a successful run on Broadway in September and is set to receive a film adaptation from Universal starring Sadie Sink and produced by Tina Fey, that adolescent messiness is framed as a sacred, wholly necessary form of catharsis.

In an impressively realistic classroom set that is only diverted from in one scene, a group of eleventh graders in a small town in Appalachian Georgia discuss high school English staples like the poetry of Walt Whitman, *The Great Gatsby*, and, of course, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. These discussions take place in an equally volatile time for their close community in 2018 as the effects of the #MeToo movement prompt them to question their understanding of goodness and authority. Belflower cleverly acknowledges the notion of parallels between the #MeToo movement and the Salem Witch Trials without completely succumbing to the comparison. The female characters are initially unified in their desire to form a Feminism Club, but this unity starts to dissolve as their loyalties are tested. The character Ivy backs out of the club when allegations come out against her father from one of his employees. The sweet, highly ambitious Beth struggles to reconcile her stated feminist convictions with her overly-close admiration for the group's teacher, Mr. Smith.

Raelynn, a preacher's daughter processing a breakup involving her ex-boyfriend Lee and childhood best friend Shelby, yearns to branch out from her stagnant "good girl" identity but is scared to name her new interests. Nell, the new girl from Atlanta, tries to adapt to a new social circle while upholding her loving nature and her voice of reason. Mason, who joined the Feminism Club for extra credit, is surprised to learn that his effort can be valuable. In short, the moral ambiguity the teens are confronted with allows them both to celebrate and to think beyond the extremes they've been living by.

The most extreme character treatment the play gives is to Shelby, who returns to school after a mysterious period of absence. Both adult and teen characters describe Shelby's demeanor as "a lot", that dreaded phrase haunting the archetype of the troubled teen girl. Although clearly troubled, Shelby is also rather smart. Her ideas and statements drive the play forward and are given serious consideration by the play as a whole. It seems that both Belflower and director Danya Taymor want the arbitrariness of growing up within social unrest to be recognized along with a celebration of the periodic joys of that time. Thematically intense scene transitions are accompanied by the pop songs of artists like Lorde and Taylor Swift, and all of it is believable, cathartic, and wonderfully "a lot". I cannot wait for this work to be translated onto the screen, and I'm so glad that a wider audience will have access to a story like this one.

Chivalry Isn't Dead:

A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms and the Return of Heroism

By: Joseph Zhai

Whether its the disappointment of the person in front of you completely forgetting how to hold the door open or seeing your date be rude to the waiter, most of us have heard or at least thought of the phrase "chivalry is dead." Whether or not courtesy has truly vanished from our society remains a debated topic. Yet, what we do know for certain is that this cynical sentiment is at least partly reflective of the sad, gradual downfall of traditional heroism in modern media. After all, cinema is art and art is the clearest window into society's moral condition.

Today, so many of our films, TV series, and books encourage us to idolize extremely likable—yet cynical and sometimes downright evil—antihero protagonists. Thrilling classics like *Breaking Bad* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* fit this theme all too accurately. Even the fantasy genre, which was once the exemplary template for heroism, has seemingly succumbed to the same cynical fate. Take *The Lord of the Rings* franchise, for example. The collection that once offered such endearing takes on honor and courage has now been all but reduced to a poor reimagining of our favorite heroes as flawed, angry pessimists, as seen in *The Rings of Power.*

Fortunately for us, HBO gives us a much-needed breath of fresh air with an old-fashioned knight's tale. Set in the same universe as George R.R. Martin's infamous *Game of Thrones*, Ira Parker's *A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms* follows the adventures of a hedge knight named Ser Duncan, aka Dunk (Peter Claffey), and his unlikely squire Egg (Dexter Ansell). The critically acclaimed pilot season begins with a newly-knighted Dunk embarking on a journey to a backwater tournament, where he plans to make a name for himself.

Dunk & Egg

Yet, as fate would have it, a procession of royal princes enters this tournament. This is where the story takes a turn for the unimaginable, in typical *Game of Thrones* fashion. The night before the tourney's main event, Dunk witnesses one of the princes threatening a puppeteer for slandering the royal family's sigil. Remembering his knightly duty to defend the innocent, he steps in to save the puppeteer, but is imprisoned for striking a prince. This then culminates in Dunk's trial by combat, which involves a battle between seven warriors on both sides. Although five valiant knights make the honorable choice of standing by Dunk, he still needs one more champion to fight for his freedom.

This is the *exact moment* the show becomes the epic fantasy the genre was built for.

Against all odds, the crown prince himself, Baelor Targaryen (Bertie Carvel), rides into battle on behalf of Dunk.

Crown Prince Baelor Targaryen

This scene only lasts a brief moment, but captures the spirit of courage and heroism that we've been missing for so long. I seriously can't remember the last time we've seen such a powerful scene depicting noble sacrifice and bravery in fantasy. After so many years of watching films and series where the bad guys always seem easier to root for than the heroes themselves, and where kings and queens always seem to be power-hungry tyrants, this scene alone broke through as a loud rebellion against modern cynicism.

I'm certain that out of the countless rave reviews this series has received, the vast majority of them highlight Ser Duncan's chivalry above all. Without a doubt, Dunk's humble, sometimes clumsy demeanor makes for a loveable protagonist. Meanwhile, his actions only make him more endearing to the audience, as in a world of arrogant lords and princes, he stands out as a knight who actually cares about his vows. Dunk breaks the mold of modern antiheroes and flawed protagonists, not in the sense that he is perfect, but rather that he doesn't let his imperfections and less than desirable circumstances get in the way of him being a good man. As a glorified medieval homeless man, he is ruthlessly ridiculed by his superiors and commoners alike. He isn't the best fighter on the battlefield, nor is he the best with his words, but he retains his dignity through his selflessness and bravery.

Similarly, the sacrifice of the men who fought alongside Dunk in his trial cannot be understated. As wealthy knights who had everything to lose, they risked their lives to protect the freedom of an unknown commoner. However, despite their courage and Dunk's endearing personality, I believe there is no moment or character in this show that can top Prince Baelor's entrance. For decades, we have been vilifying the elites of both our world and the worlds depicted in cinema; and for good reason, as they really are despicable and sadistic, especially in the real world. Unfortunately, all of this hatred towards the mere idea of power has made us lose sight of what nobility truly stands for.

As the crown prince, Baelor could have easily stood by and watched, which would have been the smarter move by today's standards. Instead, he risked his life and the future of his family to protect a man who stood for justice. Even though his story does end tragically, the fact that he chose to do what was right shatters what we have been taught to believe about heroism. Baelor shows us that no matter how much power we may have or how important we might be, nothing excuses us from doing the right thing. He exemplifies the idea that wielding strength and power is not inherently bad, as long as it's used for a noble purpose.

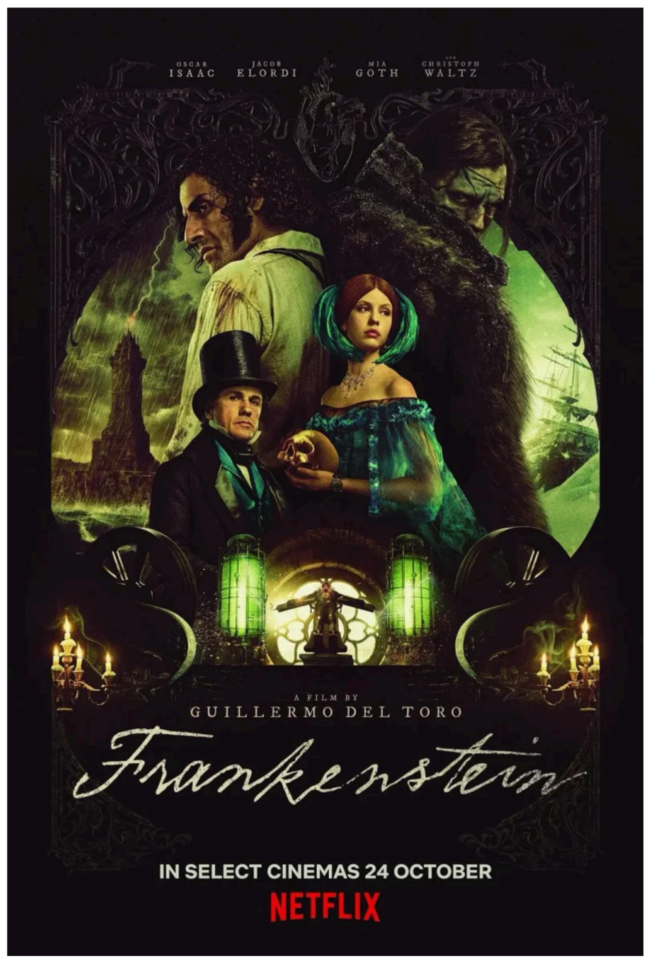
Most importantly, the heroes of *A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms* show us that a metaphorically "perfect" hero is not mere fantasy, but something that is attainable–and even expected –of all of us. Their selflessness, courage, and dedication to justice prove that the knights in shining armor of ancient times can still exist, **as long as we are brave enough to try.**

FrankenSTEIN

Guillermo del Toro vs The 1818 Text

By Karis Kim

Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025) is the Gothic science-fiction horror interpretation of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel; following the life of egotistical scientist Victor Frankenstein, the film reveals how his experiments in creating life gradually spiral into grave consequences.



Frankenstein explores the book's themes of moral responsibility, scientific ambition, and isolation through color and costumes, which earned it 9 Oscar nominations and Best Production Design and Best Costume Design at the Critics Choice Awards. However, the film places particular emphasis on the creature's humanity and the creator's culpability, offering a sympathetic lens towards the creature whereas the novel offers more moral ambiguity. This aligns with del Toro's specialty in empathetic storytelling that attempts to find beauty in the grotesque.

This isn't the only example of creative liberty taken from the original storyline. In the novel, Doctor Frankenstein secretly creates the creature with almost manic intensity in the confines of his college dormitory, driven by his fascination with science and the concept of granting new life. In contrast, the film depicts him as jaded and middle-aged, facing both admiration and disdain for his incredibly public experiments. Both fundamentally characterize the protagonist with arrogance, but the film emphasizes Frankenstein's hubris to the point of making him seem significantly more "villainous", decades old and still haunted by the trauma of his childhood, selfishly taking it out not only on his creation but those around him.

This ties into the most significant adaptation from book to screen: the moral complexity between Frankenstein and the creature are diluted, with the film unequivocally depicting Frankenstein as the "villain" and the creature as a victim of circumstance. For all the incredible visual beauty and metaphor del Toro imbues into the film, this more rigid moral binary detracts from the original significance of the text.

Frankenstein in the film not only abandons his creation, but yells at him, beats him with a stick, handcuffs him to his laboratory basement, and tries to burn him alive. The creature desperately tries to form connections with others and bonds with Elizabeth, the only person who treats the creature with gentle compassion, where she takes a bullet for him and eventually dies peacefully in his presence.

This couldn't contrast more drastically than in the book. While Frankenstein did similarly abandon his creation, he merely flees instead of prolonging the creature's suffering. Furthermore, the creature isn't merely an innocent victim throughout the story's progression. He takes vengeance on his creator by murdering Frankenstein's younger brother, a child, his best friend, and fiance (Elizabeth is Frankenstein's fiance in the novel, rather than his brother's fiance—and Frankenstein's love interest slash mother figure—in the film).

Although eventually remorseful, he nonetheless kills them purely to cause Frankenstein suffering, despite all of them being completely oblivious about the creature's existence and unrelated to the creature's hardships. Shelley develops the creature as an initially innocent being that became cruel and full of rage due to neglect, mistreatment, and loneliness, whose actions are oftentimes horrifically violent but borne out of immense, unfair pain. To wipe the creature's slate clean of any faults allows for a more direct, adaptable story yet unavoidably detracts from the novel's complex moral questions.

It's impossible to entirely transcribe a novel to screen. Everything must be introduced, explained, developed, and concluded within a finite time span, and Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* is ultimately an adjusted, visually rich interpretation of Mary Shelley's work from over two hundred years ago. The question us viewers—and readers—must contend with is if these changes dilute the story, or if they are a necessary product of its medium.

STRAIGHT WOMEN ARE HOLDING SPACE FOR QUEER MEDIA

BY: MIA VACCARELLA

"...I'm in queer media." - Tracy E. Gilchrist (confusing interview about *Wicked* (2024))

She most definitely is. But are you?

Nearly two years later, I am still stuck on *Challengers* (2024). In fact, this column is not a safe space for *Challengers* hate. Criticism is always welcome, of course. But do NOT yuck my yum on this one.

Anyway, the film is full of queer symbolism. Patrick and Art's relationship is the emotional engine of the film. Their rivalry, over tennis and Tashi, is erotic because it is intimate. There is a longing between them that is displaced onto competition because direct desire is unspeakable within the masculine, heteronormative logic of professional sports and platonic friendship. Tennis is the "socially acceptable" language of intimacy.

It is incredible. And unlike so many romantic narratives centered on heterosexual relationships, the imbalance at the heart of the film is produced by a literal points system. It depends on who will win the match. The imbalance is *not* rooted in the same gender imbalance that plagues so many romantic or sexual films about straight relationships.

So, it is no coincidence that another gayer and more sexual piece of media about two athletes eventually rose to the top.

Heated Rivalry operates on a similar logic to *Challengers*: intimacy articulated through competitive sport. And again, the power imbalance is contained within the rules of the game. These men meet as equals. They hurt each other as equals. The stakes are professional and reputational—but they are not gendered.

It *is* good that more queer media is being consumed. But I must question if we are doing it correctly.

I agree that I yearn for competition that is not gendered. A finite competition, unlike the endless rivalry between the masculine and feminine. But this leads me to a very uncomfortable question:

Would straight women still show up if the desire was not filtered through male bodies they are attracted to?

The limits of this consumption are clearest when queerness stops being so easily aestheticized. **Straight women do not want to romanticize two lesbian women in the same way that they do two gay men.** So it is not shocking that Netflix has cut essentially all of its sapphic shows. *First Kill, I Am Not Okay With This,* and *Everything Sucks* all ended after just one season.

So, where is the love for queer media here?

The fetishization of lesbians by straight men is more commonly discussed. They would not dedicate their time to something centering two men because there is no attraction, no way to center themselves. And a lot of straight women are trying very adamantly to involve themselves as participants in *Heated Rivalry*—a story in which they do not belong as anything but a viewer.

So much of the enthusiasm hinges on sexualization. Would these stories still be loved if they were not erotic? If they could not be flattened into fantasy? If desire existed without a constant visual payoff?

For example, *The History of Sound* (2025) was a highly anticipated film until everybody collectively forgot to watch it. And when I did, it fell flat in so many ways (I hate to say it, but Josh O'Connor was out-acting Paul Mescal in every single scene). But it was not nearly as bad as everyone remembers it being. And more importantly, I find it strange that people could not stop themselves from comparing it to *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) as if that is the best and only metric. Sure, both films have characters that are gay, briefly in a tent, and yearn in an open landscape. That is really where the similarities end. *The History of Sound* hinges on the characters' sexuality without positioning itself primarily as a commentary on queerness itself. It is more about loneliness produced by time, class, war, and the many failures of life. While there was not much narrative movement, it was comparable to that of *Lost in Translation* (2003) or *Before Sunrise* (1995), and both of these films are adored. So the common insistence on framing it as "boring" or "empty" feels unfair.

We are comfortable watching straight people exist in stasis. Characters can drift through cities and talk about nothing, letting life happen. Mundanity can sometimes equal depth. But when queer characters are afforded the same narrative, it is treated as a failure of storytelling because it does not serve the straight women watching it. Audiences require queer characters to be eroticized, tragic, or loudly symbolic, all to avoid their existence being inconsequential.

No, this one was not incredible. But it was good, or okay at the very least. Its failure lies in this: to interest straight women, it must be sexually tense—and if it is not, their sexuality must be their ultimate destruction. Neither of these was true.

If it does not excite or devastate straight women, it cannot be popular with them.

SEVERANCE: THE CULT OF CORPORATE CULTURE

JOSEPH ZHAI

When Ben Stiller's *Severance* first aired in 2022, critics raved about its cerebral, mind-twisting ambiance. With stunning visuals and a star-studded cast, audiences were drawn in from the get-go. Now, after a successful second season was launched in 2025, *Severance* has cemented itself as one of the most daring social commentaries of our generation. The show's depiction of corporate life and employee-management relations highlights the sheer absurdity of our own corporate careers.

In case you missed it, season one follows the monotonous life of a middle-aged man, Mark Scout (Adam Scott), whose life revolves around working for the pharmaceutical giant Lumon. Lumon is not your average big pharma company. Inside its headquarters, employees have the option to undergo a procedure that splits their consciousness into two: one for work (innie) and one for all outside activities (outie).

So, imagine that you walk into work every day and one second later you're already clocked out at 5 p.m. That's the experience of every "severed" employee. Of course, this cuts both ways as the innies quite literally have never even seen sunlight or touched grass. Even though the innies are created for the sole purpose of working so their outies don't have to, they prove to be capable of independent thought and affection. In fact, Mark's innie becomes close friends with three other severed employees. Together, they briefly escape Lumon disguised as their outies.

Season two picks up with the aftermath of their climactic escape and as expected, delivers the same riveting experience as the first season. The new season definitely moves faster, and we see more action scenes, especially near the end. More importantly, fans were pleased that the finale finally answers the question that's been stuck in everyone's mind for three years: what in the world is Macrodata Refinement, the mysterious and seemingly meaningless data-sorting work that the severed employees perform?

Yet, for a moment, if we ignore the futuristic visuals and must-see plot and take the show at face value, it becomes clear that *Severance* is a harrowing critique of corporate culture. Everything that Lumon does seems to be following the exact playbook as real-world mega corporations. From the awkward icebreakers to the interrogation-style HR meetings, the parallels between Lumon's severed floor and modern workplaces are uncanny.

From the moment we first enter the severed floor, Stiller's inspiration for the set becomes crystal clear. The monochromatic hallways and the eerily neat, minimalist office furniture scream corporate America. What impressed me about the set is just how accurately it captures that soul-sucking, claustrophobic feel of modern workplaces. Not only is the typical office ambiance perfectly encapsulated, but the work that the characters perform is vague and useless enough to match what corporate employees in our world do. Mark and the innies in his department work on "Macrodata Refinement," which nobody even knows the meaning behind. They only know that they have a computer and a task in front of them, and don't ask any questions. Sound familiar?

Perhaps the most amusing parallel is the show's depiction of HR manipulation. HR certainly doesn't have the best reputation in any workplace, and *Severance* capitalizes on the opportunity to slander them even more. Whenever the severed employees have a moment of mild dissension or self-awareness, they are sent to the "break room," where they are interrogated and brain-washed. Maybe HR isn't that diabolical in the real world, but the condescending tone and constant buzzwords used by the severed floor's managers echo exactly what you'd hear in an average office. The show captures just how irritating these corporate buzzwords are, as we constantly hear words like "quota," "wellness," and "performance review."

Speaking of performance reviews, the severed employees practically live for them. Within Lumon, there is a fanatic obsession with reaching "quota". Then, of course, the elusive employee of the month award is considered the most prestigious innie award, and it's pretty much worth more than gold to them. This fixation over work performance is so rampant that one of Mark's innie friends, Dylan G. (Zach Cherry), even brags about winning the most finger traps. Now, that takes us over to the reward system. Through simple rewards, Lumon keeps its employees just distracted enough from the reality of their situation to stay motivated. After the severed employees' escape attempt, floor manager Seth Milchick (Tramell Tillman) decides to address their discontent through "kindness reforms". These reforms implemented absurd rewards like waffle parties, dance parties, and the workplace classic: branded merch. Yet, regardless of how ridiculous these rewards might seem, they work like a charm, just like in real companies. Frankly, I can't even count how many times somebody has bragged about getting free merch or food at work.

However, the most ludicrous part of corporations that the show mocks is the idea of corporate propaganda. Whether it's the literal shrine that's built into the severed floor, or the many paintings scattered around the building to commemorate the founding family, *Severance* does not shy away from depicting Lumon as a cult. If you still have any doubt about the cultish nature of Lumon, look no further than the "Compliance Handbook" written by founder Kier Eagan. It's the only piece of literature that severed employees are allowed to touch, making it some sort of strange biblical text for them. This gets even stranger when you realize that the employees say "thank Kier" instead of the usual "thank God," seemingly deifying their company's founder. Perhaps real corporations aren't nearly as cultish, but I can't help but notice the parallels. Obnoxiously long employee handbooks, weird obsession over meeting high ranking executives, and life-consuming desires to work for "dream companies" are all very real phenomena in today's job market.

Overall, the second season of *Severance* is just as much of a smashing success as its predecessor. It fantastically drives home the point of just how absurd corporate jobs are. In a modern job market defined by increasingly ridiculous management practices and corporate worship, the show boldly, and oftentimes comedically points out the nonsense of it all.

THE X FILES

A Gen-Z Retrospective

Karren Miller-Sweeper

Everyone has that one show that their Dad *really* likes. You know the main characters (kind of) and the overall theme, but you kind of refuse to watch it because it's your Dad's favorite show. But last November, it was super cold out and gloomy, and all I wanted to do was sit in my room and watch TV. I was growing tired of watching modern shows and wanted something a little different. I went on TikTok, and the first video that popped up was about *The X-Files.* I had seen edits about the show before (one of my favorites featured a comment asking how long Mulder and Scully were in a situationship for, and someone had replied "for four presidents," which made me laugh), but in that moment, I decided to go on Hulu and click play on the Pilot. And what a decision it was. I watched all 11 seasons (and 2 feature films) in 3 months. It sounds crazy, but it was worth it, I promise! All of my friends are completely sick of me mentioning *The X-Files* in any and every context. It's raining outside? There's an *X-Files* episode where frogs rain from the sky. Are you really cold? Don't worry, there's an *X-Files* episode literally called "Ice." Although it may look old from a Gen Z perspective (there are some scenes so grainy that they make me laugh out loud), *The X-Files* is single-handedly responsible for modern television fan culture. From the plot to the characters to fan culture in general, the show deserves its audience to grow, and it serves as a perfect look into 90s culture as well as television culture in general.

To attempt to sum up the plot of *The X-Files* in one article is a task I wouldn't wish on anyone (although, get me talking, and I could probably do it). However, to sum up the show in simple terms, *The X-Files* follows FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully as they work on unsolved, unexplained cases that sometimes involve the paranormal or extraterrestrial. The show was created by writer Chris Carter. Mulder is a believer in aliens, while Scully is a medical doctor and scientist assigned to debunk Mulder and keep him in check. Scully is played by Gillian Anderson, and Mulder is played by David Duchovny. Both Mulder and Scully were inspired by two defining FBI agents of the last decade: Special Agent Dale Cooper from David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and Agent Clarice Starling from Johnathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs.*

Mulder and Scully work as partners for the majority of the show's 11-season run; however, you would like to define the term "partners." The idea of shipping has been prevalent in fan culture since fan culture became a thing. But, in terms of internet shipping, Mulder and Scully are the blueprint. The first use of "shipping" (in the sense of "relationshipping") was in 1996 in the Usenet group *alt.tv.x-files,* an online community for fans of the show, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. First called "Sculder" and then shortened to "MSR" (Mulder-Scully Relationship), the idea of Mulder and Scully as a couple has defined how shipping works in fandom now. In many online fandom cultures, shipping comes as second nature, and everyone can thank *The X-Files* for that. As for whether I believe in Mulder and Scully's relationship, all I have to say is just watch the last scene of Season 6, Episode 19, "The Unnatural," and you'll get my answer.

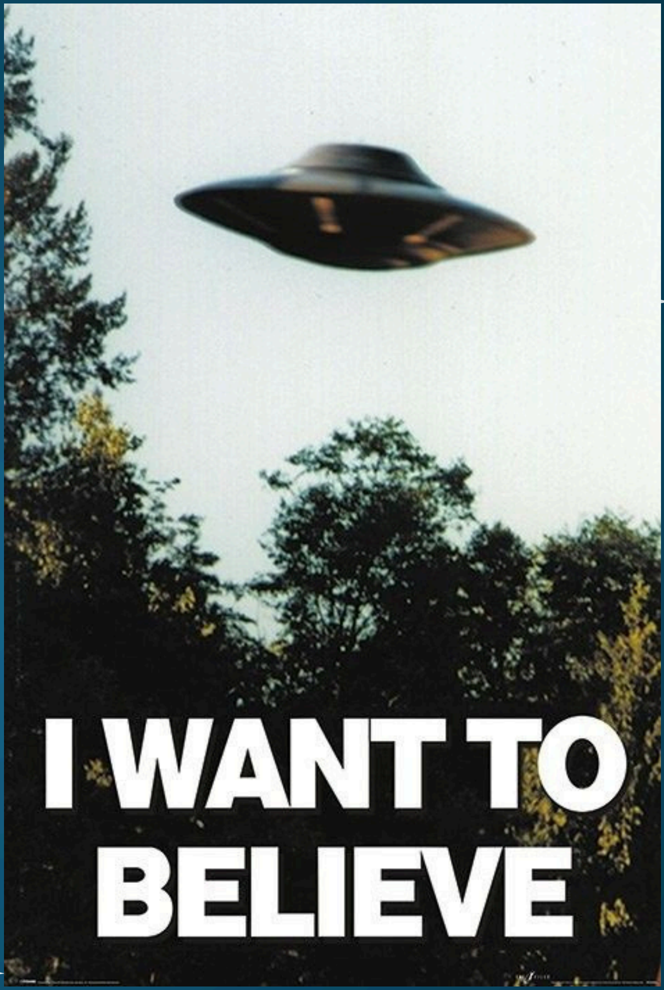
One complaint about television nowadays is that there are no filler episodes. *The X-Files* actually has the opposite problem: the filler episodes are some of the best. Yes, some episodes are genuinely bad (looking at you, "First Person Shooter").

But *The X-Files* has two types of episodes: mythology and monster-of-the-week (MOTW). Mythology episodes revolve around the show's overarching alien theme and the quest for the truth. The MOTW episodes revolve around Mulder and Scully traveling to different towns throughout the US in attempts to solve unexplained cases that somehow involve the X-Files (which, coincidentally, Mulder seems to have every file memorized). In my opinion, these "filler" MOTW episodes are miles ahead of any mythology episodes. Episodes like season 1's "Ice" and Season 4's "Small Potatoes" have some of the most iconic moments of the show, and are considered filler episodes. This is what makes *The X-Files* special. Silly episodes, like season 5's "Bad Blood," still advance the plot forward because of character development. You get to know the characters on a much deeper level than in shows with fewer than 10 episodes per season. There are even episodes that explore side characters, like season 5's "Unusual Suspects," which delves into the backstory of The Lone Gunmen, a group of men who expose government secrets through a newspaper. I personally think the Lone Gunmen are some of the best side characters in all of television (in addition to Mulder and Scully's boss, Assistant Director Walter S. Skinner), and their spinoff was canceled way too soon. Many episodes dealt with pressing issues of the 90s, but as history repeats itself, these issues also blend into a modern lens. There are several episodes about AI, including season 1's "Ghost in the Machine," season 5's "Kill Switch," and season 11's "Rm9sbG93ZXJz."

You can't talk about *The X-Files* without talking about "The Scully Effect." A study by the Geena Davis Institute found that more than half of women who watched *The X-Files* were more likely to pursue STEM careers, mirroring Gillian Anderson's Dana Scully. When talking about impact, this is one of my favorite facts about the show. Though I am very passionate about how Scully's character evolved over the course of the show, the most central part of her character is how she works. Simply put: Scully isn't afraid. She embodies something severely lacking in female protagonists in the 90s: the ability to simply be herself and to fight. Even as someone who is not particularly interested in pursuing the STEM field, I still find Scully's independence and drive inspiring.

Recently, *Sinners* director Ryan Coogler was greenlit to make a reboot of *The X-Files* on Hulu. He has very big shoes to fill: you can't really recreate the 90s of it all, and many die-hard fans are already overwhelmed with what is canonical and what is not (I personally like to believe that seasons 10 and 11 are dream sequences because what was going on). But, after the success of *Sinners*, I'd like to believe that Coogler knows what he is doing. I think the "Coogler will make the show 'too woke'" arguments lack common sense. How can a reboot based on a show about exposing the inner workings of the federal government be "too woke?" Mulder's "I Want To Believe Poster" almost got him kicked out of the FBI on numerous occasions. The very work Mulder and Scully were doing was "woke" in the sense that they were defying norms and challenging conventional wisdom. Obviously, I wasn't there for the 90s, but I also know the drastic changes in post 9/11 American culture regarding the government have affected how we view and digest media, so I do wonder how a modern audience will react to the reboot and the original run if people choose to watch it (which they totally should).

The X-Files is a significant part of American television history and is now part of my own personal canon. The characters of Mulder and Scully are deeply important to me, in a normal way, I promise! If I even inspire one person to watch the show, then my job here is done. But, don't say I didn't warn you after the first episode of season 8; this is your warning. Watch at your own risk.



I WANT TO
BELIEVE
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FOX MULDER

The “Trope-fication” of Books

By Meher Mehta

“I hate everyone but you,” “small town romance,” and “miscommunication” are just a few of the myriad tropes that have been taking the latest novels by storm. Tropes are similar to motifs: they are recurring themes and patterns throughout the novel that the author deliberately integrates. However, in recent years, the main difference between traditional motifs and tropes is that motifs typically serve an important, underlying purpose. For example, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, blood represents the violence of Macbeth’s murders, the irreversibility of his actions, and the growing tradeoff between his power & conscience. Blood isn’t just about the killings; it tells a larger tale of Macbeth’s downward spiral into villainy and insanity. Shakespeare didn’t write blood recurrently just for the fun of it; he did it to impart a larger, lasting message to his audience, one that echoes even today. The use of tropes in modern writing, however, typically does not have the same effect.

quirky relatable loser
infidelity
glamorized
forced proximity
love triangles
absentee parents
fake dating
dark angsty bad boy
enemies to lovers
damsel in distress
age gaps
not like other girls
lack of communication

The “tropefication” of books, especially in Young Adult or Romance genres, has recently been a major topic of consideration amongst writers and readers. For the past year or so, the community has been debating the use and importance of tropes in modern writing. Proponents of tropefication argue they are interesting to read about and appeal to readers seeking something extremely specific in their books. The main argument is that writers should have complete freedom to write in order to appeal to their audience, and readers should be allowed to read as many niche tropes as they want.

Those against tropefication argue that it oversaturates a novel's writing. If too many tropes are added, the plot feels forced and inauthentic. Many groups believe that such writing is less about the actual story and more about fitting in as many tropes as possible. The overall argument is that while tropes aren't necessarily bad, forcefully and purposefully integrating them into writing ruins the reading and story experience.

So, is tropefication actually ruining modern writing? The short answer: probably. While it's true that people are allowed to read and write whatever they want, it doesn't change the fact that writing with a million tropes is pretty much never objectively as good as writing with a few natural tropes. Much like the saying, "too many cooks spoil the broth," too many tropes typically ruin the story. When a story is written organically, it's very clear in the writing itself. The author typically has a stronger connection with the characters and plot, making the overall flow smooth. There are no forced tropes or subplots throughout, and the ones that are there have been placed meaningfully. Such stories are typically easier to follow, and readers leave with a stronger connection to their characters and a fond remembrance of the story as a whole.

In most cases, the overall plot gets overshadowed. It's overwhelming to read about childhood friends, enemies to lovers, city love, princess treatment, cheating, and magical realism all in one. While all these subplots may not be inherently bad, they're only being added to gain more traction—not because the writer connects with them. Perhaps the most incredulous thing of all is the fact that tropes were meant to remain as subplots, not the center of the story itself. An alarming number of writers and readers promote books entirely through tropes rather than the main plot itself. Instagram posts with sketches of main characters with a billion tropes pointing at them, TikTok videos detailing a list of books with a certain niche trope, and even online book clubs have all been ways to garner attention that should be reserved for the actual stories. Readers and writers, now more than ever, seem more interested in a book's specific niche than in the appeal and authenticity of the story itself.

childhood friends

enemies to lovers

cheating

magical realism

princess treatment

But how big a problem is tropefication, actually?

Shouldn’t people be allowed to read what they want? While there isn’t an inherent problem with specific tropes sprinkled naturally into the plot, tropefication takes away from the plot entirely. It almost encourages authors to be lazy, urging them to shove as many tropes as possible instead of crafting a good story. Now more than ever, readers even disregard books completely if they don't have preferred or traditional tropes. The oversaturation and mass integration encourages readers to keep demanding the tropes they want rather than keeping an open mind of what to read, which is a bigger problem than it seems. The lack of diversification puts them into a hole, ensuring they won’t read or consider anything besides what they want. These rigid views and inability to accept writing in different forms are indicative of issues in the book community. There isn’t a problem with reading books with a few tropes. There is a problem with only choosing to indulge in bad writing and refusing to look at anything else.

Nobody should limit themselves to reading or writing only one genre. Keeping an open mind not only allows readers & writers to discover new interests and preferences, but also creates stronger, more genuine writing in a world that believes true literature is dying.

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From Kiss to CANCELLATION

Exploring the Lack of Lesbianism in TV

Written by Gabriella Zejavac

There is a running joke in lesbian spaces about the disappointment we feel when a show we love has two women kiss. All of us know that the kiss will inevitably be the reason for the show's downfall. It doesn't seem to matter how well-received the show is or how dedicated the fanbase may be the second any prominent storyline focuses on a sapphic* relationship, that show is dead.

This concept may seem hyperbolic to those who haven't had any reason to pay attention to it, but I promise it's very much not. TV shows that are beloved by audiences are still being cancelled after one season, all because they included the unfortunate detail of centering around queer women. Series like *I Am Not Okay With This*, *A League of Their Own*, and *Paper Girls* were all acclaimed by their audience, yet all of them were cancelled quickly after their release. Maybe you're confused because you haven't even heard of half of these shows, and that's understandable due to the fact that they were all under-marketed, dooming them from the start.

Even shows that grow to greater success aren't immune. When sapphic characters are canonized, cancellation often follows. Take *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, a Netflix original show featuring a queer female lead that was removed from Netflix and ultimately been made unwatchable by any legal means. *Willow*—another sapphic show that many have never heard of due to Disney not advertising it at all—was wiped from Disney+ and is not accessible anywhere other than pirating sites. The prejudice cannot be any clearer.

These decisions raise an important question: **why are lesbian shows consistently denied growth?**

**sapphic: romance between two non-men*

The answer to this boils down to viewership. People aren't watching lesbian shows.

You may be thinking, “What? People have been loving queer romance recently? What are you talking about?” to which I say, people love gay romance, or MM romance*, not queer romance.

Let's take the most popular queer show right now, for example.

I doubt anyone reading this has somehow avoided hearing about *Heated Rivalry*. The MM romance show has gained so much attention and love over the months since its release. The series was a major queer breakthrough as it reached heights in popularity many would never have imagined (e.g. the stars becoming the torchbearers for the literal Olympic Games). Not only that, the show tells a beautiful story that resonated with queer audiences (especially lesbians, to many people’s surprise). As someone who absolutely LOVED *Heated Rivalry*, I still can’t help but resent the fact that no sapphic show could ever reach those heights of popularity, no matter how well-made it is. This is where the viewership issue applies.

Heated Rivalry has an audience composed of mostly women and the beginning of its fandom was actually pioneered by lesbians. Women tend to gravitate towards romance more than men, and queer people tend to gravitate towards queer romance. So, of course, most fans of the queer romance show would be lesbians. But as the show grew in popularity, its audience expanded to straight women and queer men too.

The issue is, you wouldn’t see this happen the other way around. Phenomenal sapphic shows do not receive this level of audience support, as their viewership is often made up of primarily lesbians and doesn’t expand into other demographics.

People will make arguments that the shows just “aren’t good” or they just “can't relate” to it. They say that the shows aren't being renewed because of that lack of quality and low viewership, but how are shows supposed to be successful if the only people watching them are lesbians? MM shows are watched by gay men, straight women, AND lesbians. Sapphic shows are almost exclusively watched by lesbians and other Queer women. Which shows would you expect to have higher viewership?

**MM romance: romance centered around two men, man x man*

Minorities are consistently expected to engage in things they have no relation to while those with the privilege of being considered the norm refuse to involve themselves in matters that don't reflect at least some aspect of their own lives. Many straight women and gay men won't watch romance between two women because they hold no attraction towards the main characters while even straight men won't watch them because, let's face it, straight men don't often engage with romance at all.

This large amalgamation of issues has only led to a decline in sapphic representation. Characters on television won't even call themselves lesbian anymore and this Don't-Say-Lesbian rule is consistent in modern television. The most popular show of the decade—*Stranger Things*—had a historic coming out moment for a Lesbian character and the character never even called herself a Lesbian. Look at any show made in the past decade with a sapphic character. They almost all call themselves "gay" or remain vague enough to deny "lesbian" as a canonical label.

Instances like this are what make "lesbian" seem like a bad word. There seems to be something scandalous about the only sexuality that completely excludes men.

It's strange, to so many people, that there are women in the world who have no need for men. In a male-centered society, this is a threat. The decline in this representation only contributes to that inherent othering of lesbians and ultimately shows that the average American has little to no acceptance for the lesbian identity. If there is no longer representation for the minority group they will continue to be invalidated, dehumanized, and seen as a threat to the status quo.

We need people to treat lesbian media like any other piece of entertainment. There are things to relate to. Relate to the romance, relate to the love, relate to what it means to feel unwanted. You can relate to the simple things that every person on Earth has experienced. The story itself is only entertaining because it's not your life. Storytelling allows you to experience the unexperienced. Media doesn't need to be a self-insert project for you to appreciate and enjoy them.

Lesbians are often left alone to exist in their own bubble. They're expected to carry the burden of sapphic representation on their backs, and this leads to the same place it always does: lack of viewership and quick cancellation.

Emerald Fennell's

"Wuthering Heights" and the Trend of Hyping Up Faithless Adaptations

By: Nikhita Kumar

When I sat down in the Rutgers theater to watch the showing of "Wuthering Heights" with my friends, I already had an inkling that it would be a complete disaster. The focus on sex, the erasure of character Heathcliffe's racial identity, the fact that the film really only covered half of the book—I already knew that this adaptation was going to be a faithless one. And so, as we watched the film and cracked up at awkwardly sexual moments in the film, a thought kept repeating in my mind:

is this really what adaptations have come to?

The answer I most often see to this question is to simply stop thinking too deeply about the film and just enjoy it for what it is. And this argument is what motivates me to pen this piece. It seems that even the people directly involved in the creation of the film want viewers to just take the film as it is without engaging with it critically. When Fennell was questioned about Jacob Elordi's casting given Heathcliffe's identity as a person of color in the novel, Fennell simply stated that this film was meant to be a reimagining of *Wuthering Heights* from the eyes of her teenage self. This is a sentiment that has been echoed by Elordi and the other members of the cast. This statement handwaves all criticism by citing the freedom of interpretation—the flawed interpretation of a teenager, no less.

Perhaps this excuse would be passable for an original film—if only barely. Some films are just meant for entertainment, and there's nothing wrong with that. But this film is attached to the name of a beloved classic with incredible depth and themes barely touched in the film. Readers of *Wuthering Heights* were so appalled by the casting of Jacob Elordi as Heathcliffe because Heathcliffe's racial identity as an "other" is central to the oppression the character faces from the other characters who view him as an outsider beneath them. It fuels his motivation to rise in society. This commentary is quite lost when casting the white Jacob Elordi. Fennell and the people involved in this film want viewers to simply take the film on its base level and to not ask for more, but when holding up this film against the original classic, it becomes difficult to do that.

It made me wonder what the purpose of the new adaptation even is. Now, this next statement is not meant to sound sex negative. The concept behind connecting fear with sex and arousal could be a valid and interesting take. But the sexual scenes in this film—the weird food imagery with the bread and fish, the scene of Heathcliffe's bride Isabella going on all fours and begging like a dog—did nothing for me besides make me laugh or cringe in discomfort. I saw no value to these scenes thematically besides existing to shock the audience with the brutal love between Cathy and Heathcliffe, and perhaps a vague desire to show female sexual liberation (which, with some of the more degrading scenes in the film, becomes questionable).
Perhaps I could've better appreciated all of the inclusions of sex in "Wuthering Heights" if it kept any other aspect of the novel's story and themes. However, Fennell's cut up, adolescent fever dream version of Wuthering Heights has apparently decided to keep none of that. Besides Heathcliffe's race change, there are many other needlessly faithless aspects of this adaptation. Firstly, "Wuthering Heights" chooses to definitively conclude the story at the halfway point of the original classic —erasing a huge part of this thematic story of intergenerational trauma and the cycle of revenge. The character of Hindley, the brother of Catherine who antagonizes Heathcliffe out of jealousy, is also removed. He plays a central role in this tale of vengefulness, familial abuse, and mutual destruction that the film refuses to fully tap into. These choices may have been made to focus more on Catherine and Heathcliffe's turbulent relationship, but you truly lose so much of the story and its themes through these removals. To call the original text *Wuthering Heights* merely a toxic romance is flawed. It is about so much more than just Catherine and Heathcliffe, yet this film would have you believe that the book is only about them. An adaptation of a classic, even if irreverent, keeps the main story beats and themes. Think of *Pride + Prejudice + Zombies*, for example—a zombie hunter-focused spin on beloved classic *Pride & Prejudice*. The premise is zany, but the common story beats and themes make it faithful to the text in spirit.

So, if there are truly so many valid critiques one could have as a reader of the original text, it is strange that there is a growing movement of people who believe that these critiques simply sap the fun out of movie-watching. The desire seems to be to just enjoy the aesthetic, the visuals, the music. Prioritizing style over substance seems to be the new norm. But if we keep allowing movies to coast by with just stunning visuals, some catchy music, and some cliche emotional beats, we risk losing what truly makes film—and really all art—so important. We lose the depth in the exploration of life and its complications, and we lose the ability to comprehend and challenge ideas. Forcing ourselves to accept mediocrity in film just because we find it difficult to think about things critically will lead to a loss in groundbreaking art.

music

The Beatles Middle Era and Its Distinct Sound

By: Noelle O'Neill

"The Beatles are the most influential band ever" is a sentence everyone has heard a million times by now. It is not exactly a shocking take, and it is not one people often try to argue against. They're THE *Beatles*, even if someone doesn't personally enjoy their music, they tend not to argue against the influence they've had over the industry. "The Beatles broke up before any of them were in their thirties" is something else people often say. This statement is entirely true, by the way: the younger members were twenty-seven and the older ones twenty-nine by the time it was all over. People often use this to emphasize how little they have done with their lives, which is, admittedly, a very nihilistic way of looking at it. Rather, it's more effective—and more interesting—to look at just *how much* they managed to do in that short period of time. The band was officially together for about eight years; this timeline can vary a bit if you count their smaller endeavors as teenagers, but this strictly refers to The Beatles as the general public knows them. Within those eight years, they released twelve studio albums, meaning there was a new album every eight months on average. Their music evolved very quickly due to this quick turnaround. However, there is still a very distinct turning point in their music, where they clearly pull away from their original style in favor of the more rock-styled music they're also very well known for. This turning point happens almost directly in the middle of this discography, with the albums *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*.

Much of The Beatles' early works are characterized mainly by the abundance of love songs and a traditional yet still innovative style. *Rubber Soul*, The Beatles' sixth album, has a sound that is still very reminiscent of those things. Songs like "Girl" and "Michelle", for example, both stick to the slightly more traditional style and topic; they're both songs that could be found on any album up until this point. "In My Life" is another love song on the album, though it shows a greater progression of their style. There is a certain complexity to the song, both musically and within its topics and view of love, that was not seen from the band up until this point; this song as a whole

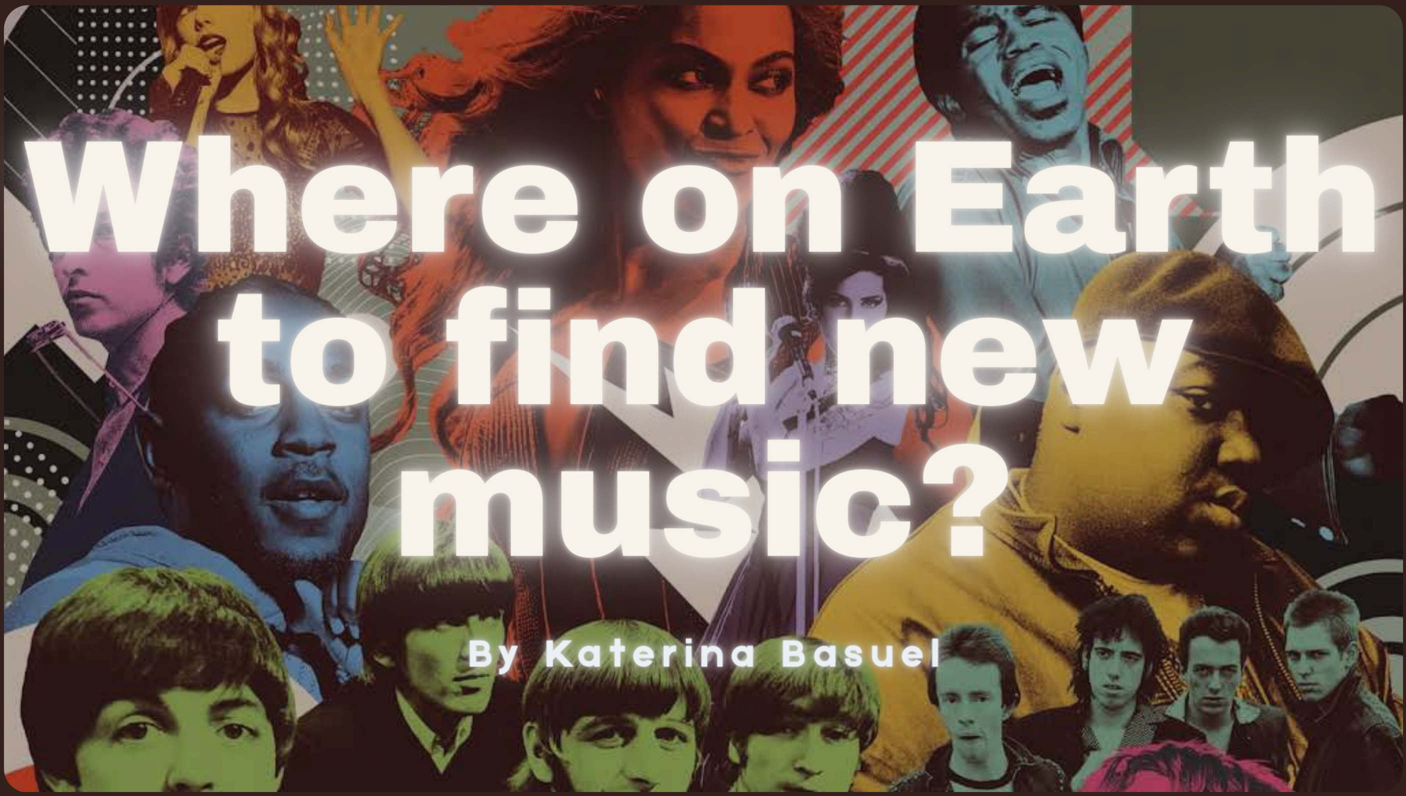
signifies a midpoint for the band's career. “Nowhere Man” is another song that builds on their previous ideas and concepts, expanding on the feelings of vulnerability and loneliness previously expressed in their album, *Help!*. There are other songs, too, that completely defy the sound they had created over their last few albums. The album starts with “Drive My Car”, a rock-heavy song (compared to their previous works) that immediately sets the tone for the rest of the album. “Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)”—the second song on the album—is the first song to feature a prominent sitar, an instrument that becomes relatively common in their later works. All of these songs, as well as the other ones that remain unnamed in this article, work together to create an album that is audibly a midpoint for the band, while still leaning towards their earlier works.

Revolver is almost the exact opposite of its predecessor: it sounds very distinct from their older works, being more modern and rock-heavy, yet it still retains some notable traits from those earlier albums. It opens with “Taxman”, a song relatively similar to the previous album's first song. It sounds even more similar to their later works, with a very unique, early rock type of sound. Many of the other songs on the album, while not necessarily rock songs, show a stark evolution of their style and are much more reminiscent of titles found on *The White Album* or even *Abbey Road* (the band's tenth and eleventh albums respectively). That's not to say that there are no songs that sound similar to their earlier works, of course. “Here, There and Everywhere” is a sweet love song that would sound right at home on their earlier albums, and “She Said She Said” has a particular rhythm and sound that are also more in line with those works. *Revolver*, like *Rubber Soul*, is a midpoint, but it's a later one. It reflects their growth more than the previous album, showing more strongly how the band has changed and how it will continue to.

It isn't groundbreaking to say that the albums found in the middle of a band's discography sound reminiscent of both their earlier and later works. In fact, it's probably a pretty basic observation to make. A band's style evolves over time, changing as they find new methods and sounds they like. The Beatles are just an interesting case: not only did their style evolve rapidly due to the sheer volume of songs they produced, but it also changed drastically. The band's early music helped bring about an entire cultural shift, becoming one of the faces of youth culture. Their later music, on the other hand, helped pioneer multiple subgenres and modern rock as we know it. Because of this, *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver* are in a very unique position. They both lie in a limbo between these two ideas, providing an audible representation of this change.

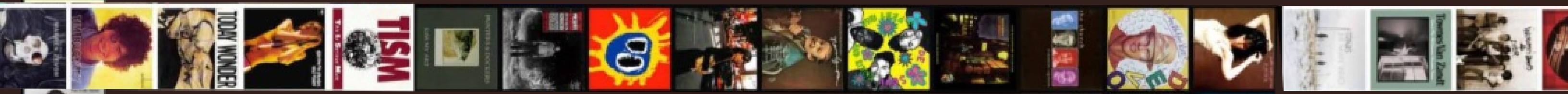
Where on Earth to find new music?

By Katerina Basuel



It’s horrifying that I’ll never hear all the music in the world. In such a modern age, with access to the world of knowledge at our fingertips, shouldn’t we logically have a solution to this? But the algorithm continues to dictate our lives, funneling us further into echo chambers while simultaneously shoving increasingly generic content at us. That is to say, I am quite tired of my Spotify suggested mixes. A few months ago, when I clicked on those suggested Spotify mixes I was content for a while. But I eventually got irritated by the same rotation of Sabrina Carpenter/Olivia Dean/Fleetwood Mac/Beyonce (“Happy Mix”) or Jeff Buckley/Radiohead/Mitski (“Melancholy Thoughtful Monday Night Mix”). There was all the music in the world, and I was listening to the same 20 albums on repeat. So, in a perhaps paradoxical move to expand my taste, I took out my earbuds and tuned into the world, compiling a list of places to find new music.

> **“There was all the music in the world, and I was listening to the same 20 albums on repeat.”**



Basement Shows

Walk along any street past College Avenue on a Friday night, and you're bound to stumble upon New Brunswick's famous underground music scene. These DIY shows, run out of basements, backyards, garages and restaurants, have been the training grounds for bands like Thursday and My Chemical Romance. The thriving scene hosts plenty of local artists, ranging from indie rock to thrashing punk. Pack yourself into the throng, stay hydrated, and use earplugs to protect your hearing from the head-banging rush of local talent. Although it might be hard to hear over the excitement of the crowd, there's no better feeling than looking up a band's discography after an ear-ringing show and discovering a new favorite artist. And there is, maybe, no greater betrayal than realizing you heard an unreleased song. But you'll always have the memories, and that's more important anyway!

Protests

This begs the question: do protest chants count as music? It's not unusual for political gatherings to include music, often being outlets for celebrating culture in the face of a looming homogeneity. Of course music would be there too. But the call and response nature of a chant strikes a familiar chord to my long career as a Girl Scout, where a single-file trek through the woods was just as likely to inspire a peppy chant as it was to jumpstart a rendition of Britney Spears. When I hear so many voices harmonizing, I can't help but think of it as music, even without a backing track. Perhaps protests are not the place to find the newest Geese album, but you'll always learn something when you listen to the world around you. There's a universe of art and culture to be found, as long as you have the curiosity to look for it.

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Mason Gross Performances

Music isn't just for the basement scene: sometimes the most moving composition is waiting over at the Mason Gross school. The arts college puts on (oftentimes free) performances of dance, orchestras, choral music, new music, jazz, opera, and theater. These talented artists are constantly on stage, and what is a performance without an audience? Check the online schedule and carve out an evening with some friends to bask in your chic, cultured aura.

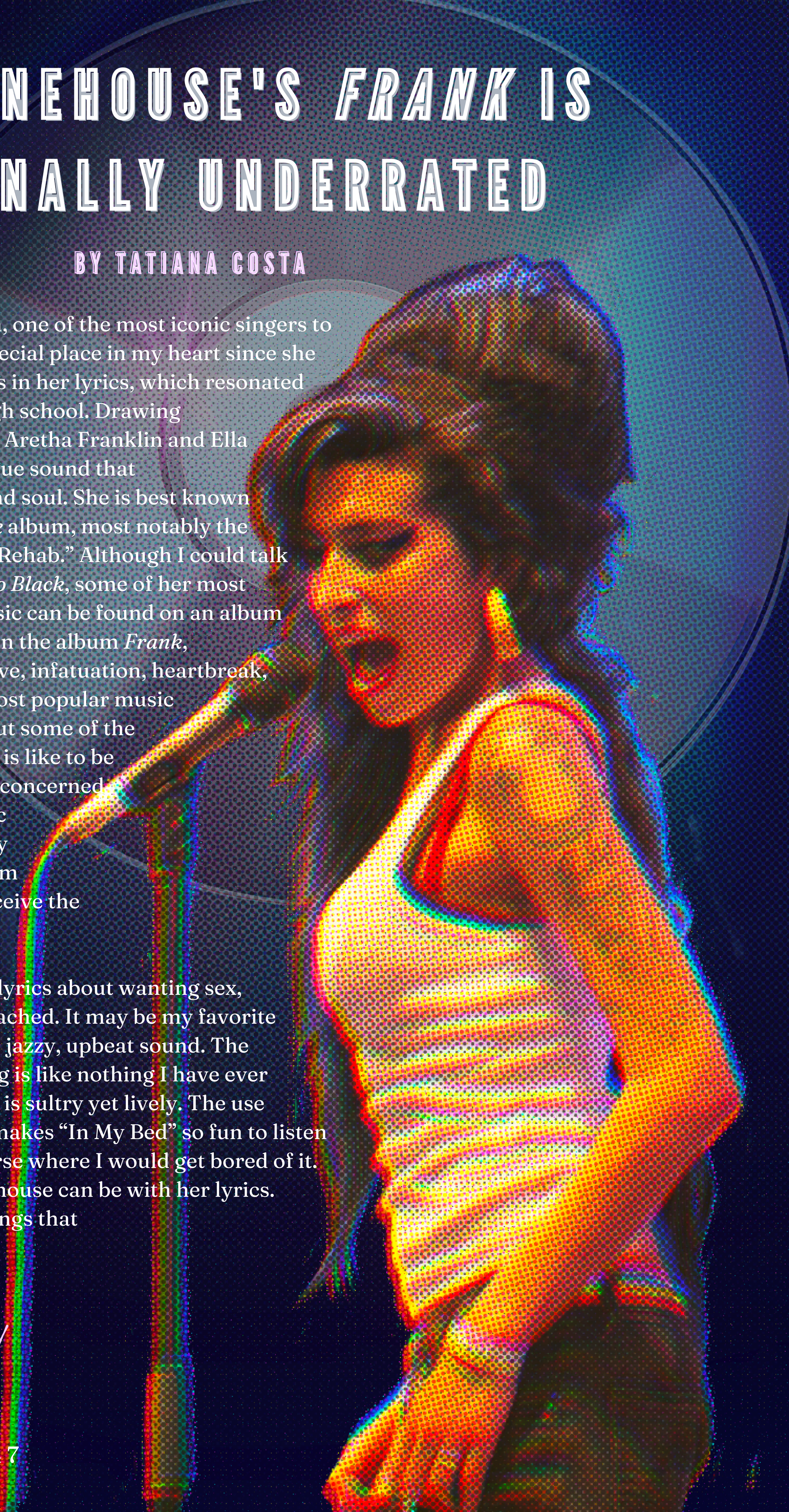
> **"Come for the music. Respect one another. Face each other instead of the DJ. No phones allowed on the dance floor. Dress to express yourself. Dance your heart out."**

Youtube Mixes

Lots of people are familiar with the famous "Boiler Room" DJ sets, starring artists like Charli XCX and Kaytranada, but that's only the tip of the iceberg. DJ sets on Youtube are likely the only reason I've ever finished essays. Although I mostly dislike the Spotify algorithm, I've found that Youtube has gold when you look for it. One favorite channel, Book Club Radio, films sets at small New York house parties, where their manifesto states: "Come for the music. Be open to unfamiliar music and sounds. Respect one another. Face each other instead of the DJ. No phones allowed on the dance floor. Dress to express yourself. Dance your heart out." The sets with the best tracklists, in my opinion, are the ones that follow these rules and prioritize the joy of the people there, showing their sheer love for good music. Other suggestions include Gia Fu, who mixes her Chinese heritage with a cross-cultural love for Latin-music, and any video along the lines of "the homies mixing R&B and burning grilled cheese."

AMY WINEHOUSE'S *FRANK* IS CRIMINALLY UNDERRATED

BY TATIANA COSTA



Amy Winehouse is, in my opinion, one of the most iconic singers to ever live. Her music has held a special place in my heart since she explores deep emotional concepts in her lyrics, which resonated with me greatly when I was in high school. Drawing inspiration from great artists like Aretha Franklin and Ella Fitzgerald, Winehouse had a unique sound that undeniably has its roots in jazz and soul. She is best known for the songs off her *Back to Black* album, most notably the record's title track and the song "Rehab." Although I could talk all day about the tracks on *Back to Black*, some of her most interesting and experimental music can be found on an album that she released at age twenty. On the album *Frank*, Winehouse explores themes of love, infatuation, heartbreak, and lust. Much of Winehouse's most popular music deals with loss and heartbreak, but some of the songs on this album show what it is like to be the heartbreaker, to be wholly unconcerned with the feelings of your romantic partner. The songs I selected truly showcase her artistry in this album and prove that *Frank* does not receive the attention that it deserves.

"In My Bed" is a song with clever lyrics about wanting sex, without the emotional strings attached. It may be my favorite track on this album because of its jazzy, upbeat sound. The guitar in the beginning of the song is like nothing I have ever heard before, the song as a whole is sultry yet lively. The use of a wide variety of instruments makes "In My Bed" so fun to listen to, I'm not sure if there is a universe where I would get bored of it. This song shows how witty Winehouse can be with her lyrics. In part of the second verse, she sings that

"It's not hard to understand /
Why we just speak at night /
The only time I hold your hand /
Is to get the angle right."

We see in this song a woman taking back her autonomy and being fully in control of how this relationship operates.

On this album, there is one song that holds a deeply special place in my heart. “Take the Box” is an emotional song about going through the process of a breakup and not wanting to hold onto anything that reminds you of your ex-partner. Her vocal talent truly makes this song so beautiful, along with the lyrics that show the complex feelings that come with ending a relationship. The song tells the story of a woman going to her ex’s apartment with a box of all the items he gave her during their time together. Her lyrics in the second verse reveal a sense of conflict between hatred and love:

“Feel so fucking angry, don't wanna be reminded of you / But when I left my shit in your kitchen / I said goodbye to your bedroom / It smelled of you”

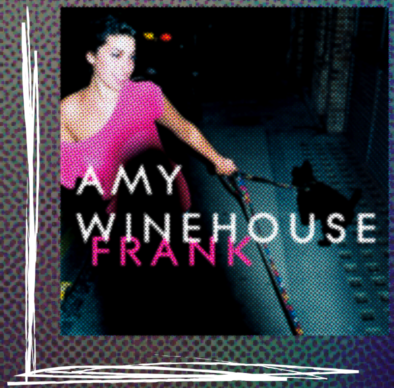
She momentarily forgets her anger at him and embraces the familiar smell of his room, forcing her to relive the happiness they once shared.

“Stronger Than Me” is a song that truly showcases Winehouse’s witty lyricism, while incorporating the jazzy sound that makes this album so fun. This song, however good it may be, is not without its share of controversy. Winehouse humorously says that she feels “like a lady”and that her partner is like a “ladyboy,” to demonstrate that she feels her boyfriend is not fulfilling his role as a man in their relationship.

Although these lyrics are problematic in hindsight, she conveys this frustration and unfulfillment that many straight women feel in their relationships. Winehouse laments having to comfort her partner daily, while she feels neglected by him emotionally.

“(There Is) No Greater Love” is a sweet love song with a sound that almost reminds me of artists like Frank Sinatra. Originally composed in 1936 and sung by artists like Billie Holiday, Winehouse’s cover of this song is a beautiful interpretation of an older jazz staple. Her choice to cover this song speaks not only to her artistry as a musician but to her taste as a music fan. Unlike other songs on this album, “No Greater Love” is a slow-paced song with quiet vocals. Additionally, this is one of the few tracks on this album that shows a positive depiction of love.

“What Is It About Men” is a raw exploration of what it feels like to make poor decisions regarding love. Winehouse laments that she often chooses partners who lead to an increase in destructive behavior, rather than being uplifted by that relationship. Paired with Winehouse’s vivid storytelling, the song’s relaxed sound allows the listener to become engrossed in the lyrics.



In the first verse of the song, she mentions some parts of her upbringing that led to this romantic failure:

“Understand, once he was a family man / So surely I would never, ever go through it firsthand / Emulate all the shit my mother hates / I can't help but demonstrate my Freudian fate / My alibi for taking your guy / History repeats itself, it fails to die / And animal aggression is my downfall / I don't care about what you got, I want it all”

In the second verse, she expresses frustration at how natural it seems for her to be in a toxic relationship:

"I'm nurturing, I just wanna do my thing / And I'll take the wrong man as naturally as I sing / And I'll save my tears for uncovering my fears / Our behavioral patterns that stick over the years "

For many, this experience of choosing the wrong person is incredibly relatable, and she perfectly explains the helplessness one feels when this happens.

"Mr Magic (Through The Smoke)" is another really fun and refreshing song off this album. This song really shows Winehouse's love of jazz. The music itself was originally an instrumental song with saxophone and guitar by Grover Washington Jr. called "Mister Magic," but she made the song her own with her lyrics. A love song of sorts, "Mr Magic (Through The Smoke)" is a song about being dependent on marijuana in which Winehouse writes about the substance as if it were a person. This song is another example of her use of humor in her lyrics, in the second verse she writes

"Without you, I'm misery /Blue without my green."

Much like her music, Winehouse was not a one dimensional figure. Many remember her for her tragic death or her melancholic lyrics, but I choose to remember her for the lively person she once was and for the fun she had with music.

Wishbone WORLD TOUR

The Concert I Didn't Know I Desperately Needed

Amber Safeer

act 1: B.C. – before Conan

Though I have been to very few concerts in my lifetime (because, expensive), I consider myself an avid concert lover. When preparing for the *Wishbone World Tour*, I followed my typical pre-show rituals: listening to all of the artist's songs on repeat for a week leading up to the event, meticulously planning out an outfit only to switch it the day of, and stalking TikTok to stay up to date with all the concert traditions.

I came into the night expecting a fun experience with friends. **What followed was actually the most emotional concert of my life.** But first, some context.

Before I knew Conan Gray for his music, I knew him for his traditional art. As an aspiring artist in high school with my own art Instagram account, Conan Gray's YouTube channel served as an inspirational hub for my artistic career. Specifically, I was enamored with the realism he achieved with Prismacolor pencils in the pieces he showcased in his AP Art Portfolio. His flawless blending style, visually interesting subject matter, and enticing compositions were something I sought to replicate in my own art.

It was soon after watching this video that I became familiarized with his debut EP, *Sunset Season*, arguably best known for the songs *Crush Culture*, *Idle Town*, and *Generation Why*. His songs were cheeky, relatable, and had a refreshingly young indie sound that was ever-popular at the time. From then on out, I considered myself a casual fan, eagerly tuning into his new singles and albums, but mainly listening to his top hits.

So when I started to go absolutely feral at the *Wishbone World Tour* concert at the Prudential Center in Newark on February 27, I started asking myself: *why*? I mean, obviously, I loved his songs and really enjoyed the heartbreaking storytelling mixed with angelic vocals on *Wishbone*, and I always enjoy the feeling of togetherness in an arena crowd, but those answers didn't satisfy me. So I continued digging.

act 2: a teen in their feels

I realized that, unbeknownst to me, Conan Gray's music was there for me during the most pivotal moments of my life. *Sunset Season* in 2018, in my freshman year of high school. *Kid Krow* in 2020, at the height of the pandemic, and when I was mentally at my lowest. *Superache* in 2022, when I finally graduated high school and was headed into my first year of college. Notably, I did not listen to *Found Heaven* (2024) when it first came out (save for *Never Ending Song* and *Bourgeoisieses*), and interestingly, there was no big milestone this year either. However, when the pressures of starting my senior year of college were getting to me, *Wishbone* (2025) was there for me. After a break from not consistently listening to Conan Gray, this album really reminded me of how much I adored his music, and encouraged me to go back to listen to the experimental 80s-inspired *Found Heaven*, which is now my favorite album of his.

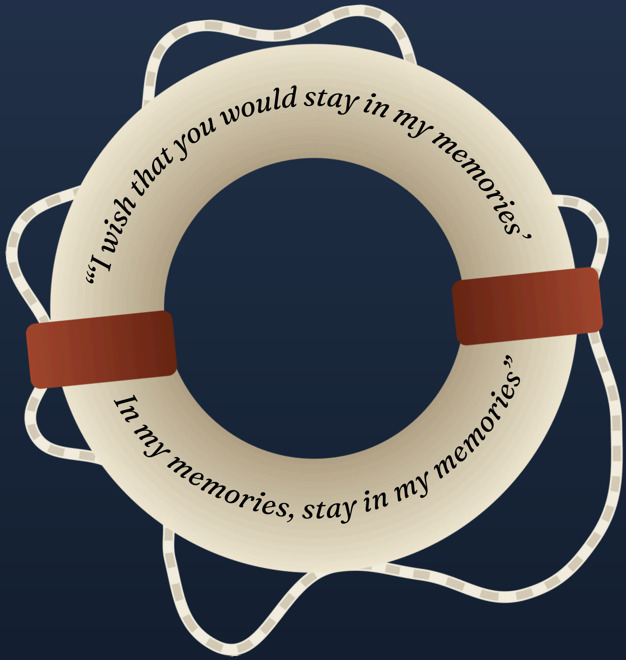
February 27, 2026

act 3: the concert

All of this built-up emotion that had previously gone unrealized came to a climax the second I heard the notes of the opening number, *My World*, while Conan Gray came wheeling out on his bicycle decked out in full sailor realness. I screamed my heart out, jumped around like a damn kangaroo, and burned my cheeks from the smile plastered on my face throughout the whole show. Hearing the songs I had been listening to for all my young adult life performed live with such manic energy was exhilarating.

The show, which is broken up into four acts (followed by a 2-song encore), progresses not only through key moments of Gray's discography, but also through his personal life. Prevalent through his music is his experience navigating the world as a gay male teen, and the hardships that come with that in both romantic and familial relationships. This queer representation is rare in the mainstream music industry, and it is obvious how much it means to the fans, especially when heard live. While I do not directly relate to all of the stories Conan relays, I recognize his criminally underrated storytelling and how he has grown both as an artist and as a person through his songs.

During the show, he confided in our Jersey crowd that the last time he was in NJ, he was playing a *much* smaller, more cramped venue. It was an endearing moment that made me feel so proud of how far he has come. More than that, though, I felt like I matured with him, and that his perseverance toward success in his career despite the adversities he faced mirror my own personal successes in life. This became alarmingly clear when our fan-chosen surprise song was *Lookalike*, a song that hails from his very first EP, *Sunset Season*, and I reminisced about listening to it as a freshman in high school. This rung true again at the first encore song, *Memories*, which despite being a melancholic ballad about a toxic relationship that just won't end, almost took on a totally new meaning when Gray returned to the stage no longer as a sailor, but upgraded in his fully bedazzled captain's uniform.


"I wish that you would stay in my memories'
In my memories, stay in my memories"

The lyrics were the same as they had always been, but suddenly, it was the audience and Conan singing to one another, hoping for the concert to always be a part of them.

act 4: tying up loose ends

Since this wasn't a traditional concert review, I want to take the time to quickly mention just some of my favorite moments from the Newark performance:

Footnote being played during Conan's campfire, where he sentimentally admitted that it was one of his favorite songs he's ever written.

Conan's ex (Ethan a.k.a. The Grinch) being the one to break the wishbone, but getting the short end of the stick. *"Yeah... yeah. That really makes you think, huh?"* - Conan Gray

Conan introducing himself using the *bad idea right*? mute challenge that Olivia Rodrigo features in her concerts.

"Heather, if you're out there... I'm sorry. But also I'm not! 'Cause this song is a BANGER!" before singing the legendary hit *Heather*.

And finally, the crowd. Through it all, they brought the energy to the MAX and truly made the concert as moving as it was.

what Olivia Dean taught me about love

By: Sophie D'Errico

When Olivia Dean won "Best New Artist" at the Grammy Awards, one might have expected spectacle and flash. While Dean certainly delivers a visually striking performance with her gorgeous curly hair blowing in a fan, a golden backdrop, and a striking red dress, her music prioritizes something different entirely: intimacy and authenticity.

When you begin to care about someone truly and vulnerably, you can run the gamut of every emotion in a remarkably short span of time. When I first played her newest album, *The Art of Loving*, I realized how deeply Dean understood this. Her songs are not merely love songs, but streams of consciousness that read like conversations from a journal. The album is a case study of love in all of its forms– romance, confidence, confusion, frustration, grief– emotions you can feel about the same person all at once.

The Art of Loving was written and recorded in a cozy home in East London, where producers and musicians collaborated for eight weeks. Many of the lyrics and ideas came out of late-night, red wine-infused conversations– and frankly, I wouldn't want a record about love to be written any other way. The safe space they

created during the writing process is tangible throughout the album. You can hear it in the honesty of the lyrics, in the thoughts that people only admit when they feel comfortable enough to say them out loud.

The track "Close Up" tells the quietly tragic story of finally being alone with someone who once lit a fire underneath you, only to realize that the spark is not there after all, and that it may have only been flickering within you.

Now I'm here and we're finally alone / Why do we feel so distant?

To understand this song is to have experienced the push and pull of someone who made you feel electric. The high intensity, followed by sudden distance, leaves you questioning what was real and what was imagined.

The album then pivots into "So Easy (To Fall In Love)," where Dean explores self-love and confidence, declaring that she is, in fact, so easy to fall in love with. At first glance, this might seem like a sharp contrast to the previous track's insecurity, but it actually complements it perfectly. Love and relationships often create this exact kind of emotional whiplash. One moment you question everything about yourself, and the next you realize that perhaps the problem was never you to begin with.

Much like the experience of love itself, Dean's sound refuses to stay in one place. Her music spans genres like R&B, pop-soul, Motown, and jazz. The stylistic variety mirrors her emotional shifts within the album.

One line I really love is *I'm the perfect mix of Saturday night and the rest of your life / Anyone with a heart would agree.* It radiates pure confidence and joy while delivering a subtle sting to anyone who may have failed to see her worth.

Another standout line is when Dean praises herself for *the way I make you laugh.* It reminded me of how easily we can sometimes get swept up in romantic chemistry when the truth is that the magic was actually our own light and warmth shining all along. The other person was simply there to receive it.

For anyone who has been left behind, the track "Loud" cuts deep. It captures the intimacy of silence, how so much hangs in the void of not speaking to someone who once occupied such a prominent space in your life.

And everything's unspoken now / I'm out, the silence is so loud.

Being hurt by someone you care deeply about is a different kind of pain. You can't even be fully angry. Instead, you're left confused and disappointed, wondering how someone who knew you so well could still choose to hurt you. Even then, the care doesn't disappear overnight.

Who would do that to a friend, let alone the one you love?

The album's title and themes draw inspiration from the book *All About Love* by bell hooks, the major insights of which are that love is a conscious action rather than a feeling. It is a choice one makes grounded in intention, despite potential fear. hooks also argues that genuine love for others cannot exist without a foundation of self-love.

Listening to *The Art of Loving*, it is clear that Dean understands this philosophy. Her songs are not merely about falling in love or getting your heart broken; they are about loving responsibility. To acknowledge your pain and still choose yourself in the end. That lost connection is still a lesson gained.

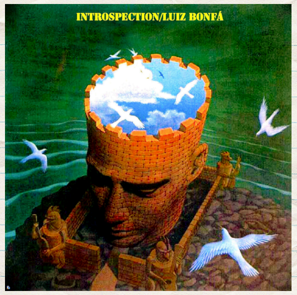
So maybe that's what I learned while listening to this album. Not every spark means a happily ever after, but the real love and care that Dean sings about and bell hooks writes about comes from intention and steadiness. The rest fades into loud silence.

MUSIC

miscellaneous

Brian Kataro

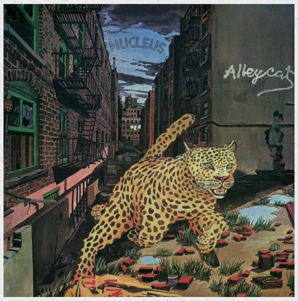
Over the years, many things have changed. There's been worsening climate change, economical and housing market crashes, impending doom and gloom galore, etc. But most certainly of all, we've changed, naturally, with time. And with it, so too have our music tastes. For a good chunk of time now, I've been amassing a master playlist of every "era" of music that I've been in, ranging from quick 30 second audios that developed to earworms to multi-hour long albums that appeared on my Youtube algorithm, daring me to refresh and never see it again. Please find a menagerie of some small miscellaneous songs and albums that have stayed and haunted me through the years; and maybe start your own journey of a "Junk Drawer" playlist of any songs you find (shoutout to the previous issue of *The Rutgers Review*).



Luis Bonfà - Introspection

When this absolute beauty of an album cover crossed my page, I knew I was in for something good. Having the album *Introspection* depict a fortress of someone's head, allowing the viewer to peek inside, is just beautiful in every way imaginable -- and this is furthered by the music itself. Purely instrumental, Bonfà manages to strum together guitar pieces that somehow encompass the feeling of leisure, yet demand resolution. The varying pace of the music and emotions that dance with it allow each song to call on memories that morph and sing along. Every note feels so personal, almost like reading someone's deepest thoughts; their agony, indecisiveness, inquisitiveness, love, all bundled into one neat, fluid experience.

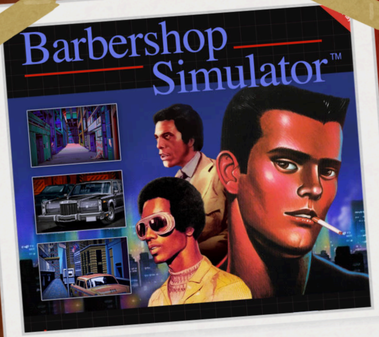
Nucleus - Alleycat



Yet another instance of seeing a banger album name and cover on my timeline, *Alleycat* offers 41 minutes of brassy jazz-rock from 1975. Perfect for a late-night drive or when you're in the groove to get groovy, the album's horns and addictive bass are the cure to any ailment.

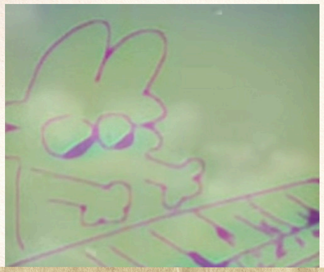
Masayoshi Takanaka

Who else to mention on this list than the man who is skydiving in the cover of "All of Me", popping up on a beach in "Brasilian Skies", or jogging down a highway in "Insatiable High"? Takanaka provides a wonderful fusion of J-Rock, jazz, and funk in his high-energy songs. Throwing out some of my favorite songs as: “E.S.P”, “Tokyo Reggie”, “Finger Dancin'”, “Ready to Fly”, and “Just the Way You Are”. So many of them have this infectious joy and happiness in their rhythms that can't help but make the sun shine a little brighter and plaster a smile on my face.



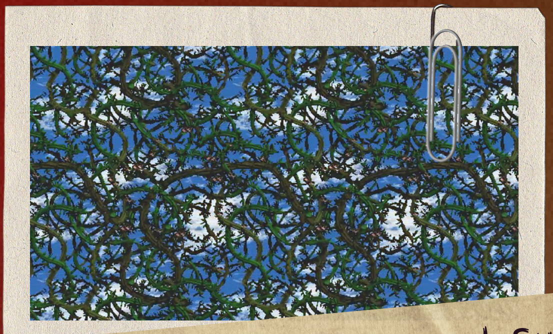
Slowerpace - Barbershop Simulator

I love a bunch of Slowerpace's compilations and mixes, but *Barbershop Simulator* had to be one of the first albums that I sank my teeth into. You may notice the pattern now, but PSX-style cover art for a fake game made for perfect bait in a YouTube homefeed. Again, once you start listening to random albums with really good cover art, the hits just keep on coming. *Barbershop Simulator* acts fittingly to its art, working wonderfully as strong background music for many tasks, making the night feel young with the piano, percussion, and heavy synth filling up the airwaves.



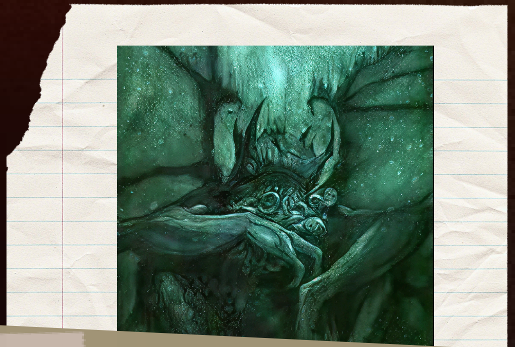
vslush - “You Smell Of Dead Flowers”

A bit of a jump here, but the title alone deserved a click. I was welcomed by a pitchy electric keyboard and a static-filtered animation of a creature slamming down keys on a piano. Lyrics flood the scene, contrasting the almost-music-box soundfont to descriptions of rot, decay, and hopelessness. A simple, quick song, but it lingers.



Donkey Kong - "Stickerbrush Symphony"

This was one of those songs that popped up on my feed in kanji nearly a decade ago -- with only an image of twisting vines and a sky-blue background as an image to go by. What I found was a soothing, reflective melody and an entire community dedicated to this post. I had stumbled on an online "checkpoint", wherein people were using the comments to leave notes, messages, and diaries to themselves, and how far they've come. People wrote about losses in their lives, struggles, promotions, aging, illness, graduation, and most prominently, uncertainties – with the video having an effect in popping up on people's feeds when they need it the most. I spent hours listening to the simple melody while scrolling through, reading people's stories and words of advice. If not for the song, I would still recommend searching up the video just to see a monument of records and diaries coalesced all in one place.



"I Saw Mommy Kissing Yog-Sothoth"

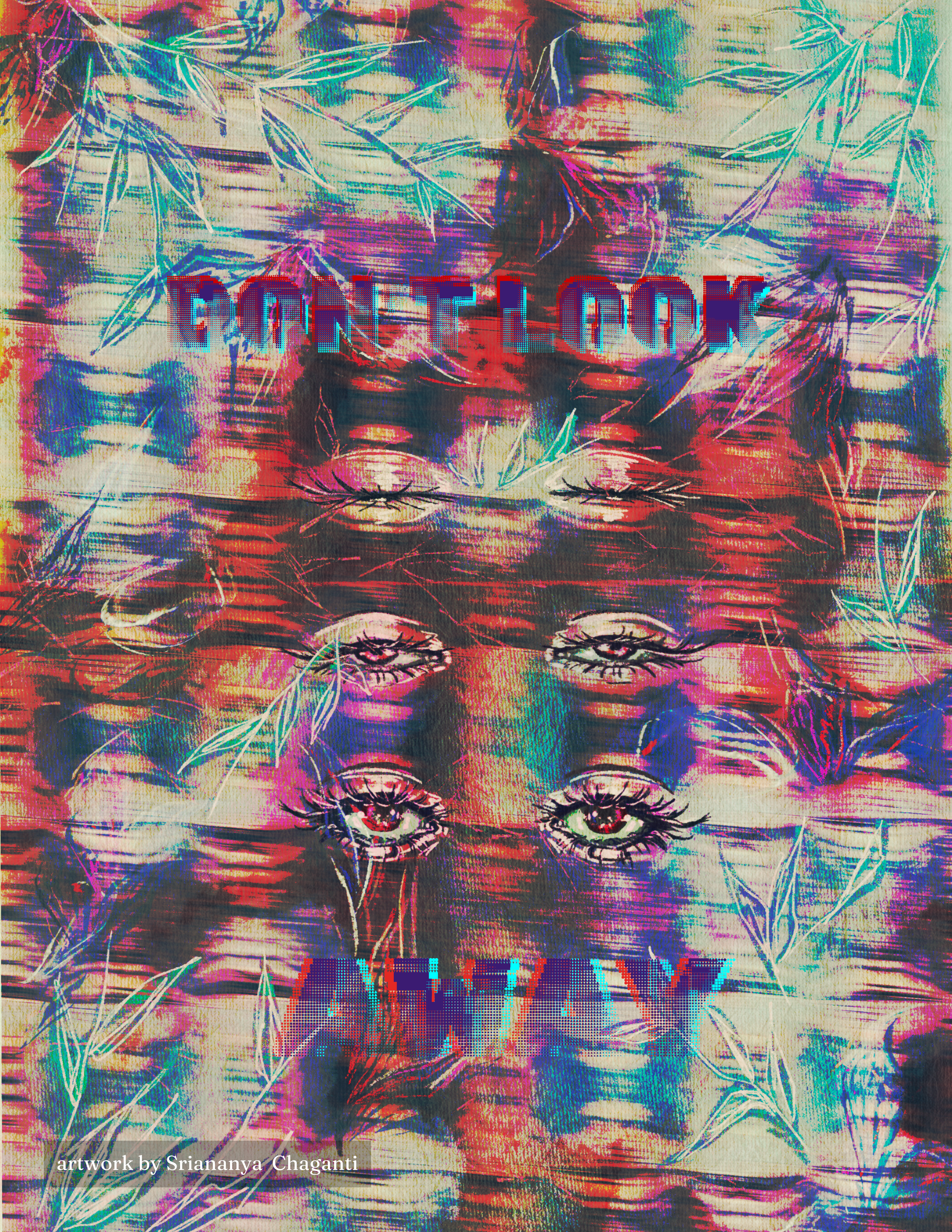
Christmas songs and the Lovecraftian mythos?: A more likely pairing than you may think.

I found this gem of a recording - distributed by members of the H.P. Lovecraft Society, late one December night, in Alexander Library, preparing for an all-nighter for a final that next morning. It was cold, raining, and dark, yet this song -- soon followed by other covers from the society of musicals or holiday classics -- acted as a warm, slightly off-putting embrace against all odds. The punny lyrics, yet great singing and musical work by the artists, were a joy to listen to, and may or may not have contributed to acing the exam the following morning, running on fumes and eldritch fear.

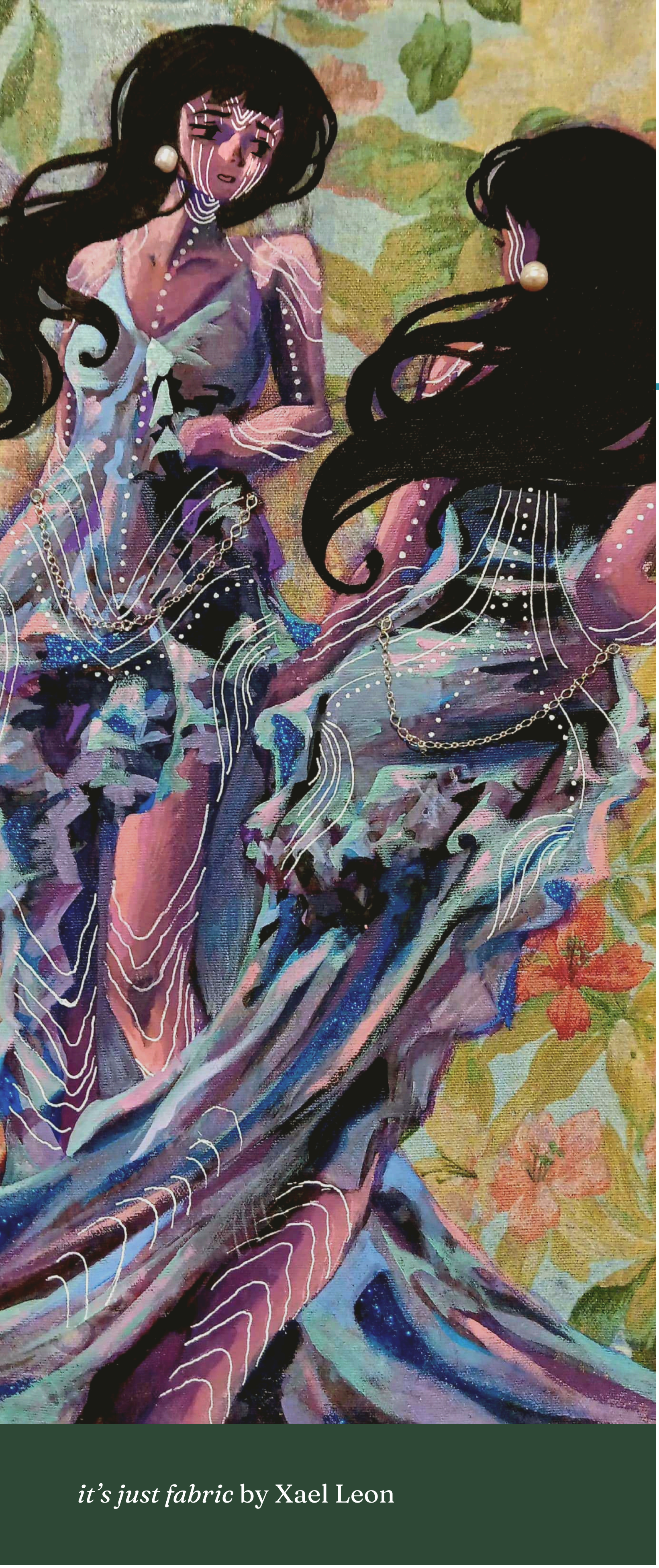
HIMIKO KIKUCHI
FLYING BEAGLE

Himiko Kikuchi - Flying Beagle

Bringing back the crazy cover arts, *Flying Beagle* offers a side-eye from a photogenic beagle. What they hide is an album of pure bliss; funky, jazzy, electronic, and energetic, the album transports you to a land of fast-paced and fittingly out of this world musical wonders to groove and move to. -- The B side of a beagle about to pounce is also a great bonus to look at while listening.


DON'T LOOK
AWAY

artwork by Sriananya Chaganti



it's just fabric by Xael Leon

Don't Look Away On Getting To Know Who You Really Are

by Meghan Mangan

Do people ever know who they really are? I sit here in my bed, three months out from college graduation, and I am scared. I have spent my whole life wishing the days and minutes would speed up so I could become an adult. As the time ticks closer to graduation day, I yearn to go back to being young again, afraid of the person I will become in the future.

My whole life, I have been known as an athlete or the girl who never had time for parties or hanging with friends because of my sport. Training for 20 hours a week with like minded women made me feel empowered as an athlete. As I reflect back on my past 10 years in the sport, beneath the thick layer of athleticism I have built, I have always been someone else that I just don't know quite as well.

Just the other day I was told by someone very close to me, "You aren't going to change, you are just going to become more you," and that got me thinking about getting to know who I am, outside of being an athlete.

So with that being said, I am writing to the young women that has always been with me deep below but one that I don't know quite that well:

Thank you for always being there for me. I have been afraid of knowing who you really are my whole life, and I don't think that after I graduate from university, I will immediately realize who you are. But there is an art in that, right, finding who we are together?

We will get to experience our young twenties together, like traveling to new places, exploring parts of the world that we have not been to, writing and drawing till our fingers hurt, meeting new people, laughing till our bellies sting, drinking all the fun and silly drinks, and just being young and free. I don't think we have ever been the type of person to slow down. Maybe we will be later down the road, but I think it's safe to say that won't happen in our twenties.

Though at some point, I can imagine we would get tired from traveling the world and being in our 20's and find the art in slowing down. Maybe we will end up with a ring on our finger, and get married in the beautiful lace dress we have dreamed of since we were a little girl. One that our handsome husband can spin us around in. Soon after, perhaps we will move to a small yet beautiful house with endless amounts of land so that when life starts to pick up again, we can fill it. Always having dreamed of having kids and a few dogs, and maybe that will happen, but only time will tell.

Before we know it, we will be comfortable with each other. We will know things we do not know now, and we will pick apart the past to know each other more deeply. But let's be honest - I do not think I will have a single word to describe who you are, more so, the experiences that we will create together will shape who we are!

So as I prepare to turn the page and shut the door on my university days, it's so easy to yearn and grieve what I still have for the next three months. Singing and dancing on the kitchen chairs with my roommates, late-night conversations in the bathroom while brushing our teeth, the eight of us squeezing on a small couch, bundled in blankets with our twinkle lights on, watching romantic movies, laughing till our stomachs ache, crying till our eyes hurt, and just endless emotions filled under one roof.

In a few months, it'll be gone, and life will be different, but I look forward to meeting you, well, actually meeting myself!

Friends From Middle School by Xael Leon

The Epstein Files:

WHY CANT WE LOOK AWAY

Hermeline Berteloot

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Disclaimer: *This article does not issue judgment on any individual beyond what has been established in a court of law. Any references to individuals who have not been convicted are based on allegations and should not be construed as claims of guilt. Please consult the sources consulted at the end of the article. Readers are encouraged to consult credible primary sources and form their own conclusions.*

Trigger warning: human trafficking, sexual abuse of children, and other sensitive topics will be discussed.

Jeffrey Epstein’s sickening crimes are resurfacing after 20 years. They are making headlines internationally. After decades of investigations, indictments, settlements, and Epstein’s own death, it is baffling that the case hasn’t been put to rest. If anything, the release of new files has made it harder to look away and harder to know what to believe. Why won't it go away? The answer says as much about us onlookers as it does about the perpetrator. The persistence of the Epstein case in public consciousness reflects not only institutional failures to deliver accountability but the public's own tendency to process the case through psychological and political filters that ultimately obstruct justice for its victims.

In a federal indictment filed in the Southern District of New York in 2019, Jeffrey Epstein was charged with sex trafficking conspiracy and sex trafficking of minors. Prosecutors alleged that Epstein operated a system in which he recruited and sexually exploited dozens of underage girls at his residences in Manhattan and Palm Beach.

According to the charges, Epstein and his associates lured the girls with offers of money in exchange for “massages,” which then escalated into sexual activity. He allegedly paid victims hundreds of dollars in cash and encouraged some of them to recruit additional minor girls, creating an ongoing pipeline of victims. The indictment further alleges that Epstein’s employees helped arrange appointments and contact victims. His most well-known co-conspirator, as well as the only one to have been convicted of crimes, is Ghislaine Maxwell.

A 2022 press release from the U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, explains that Maxwell was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison for her role in Epstein’s schemes. She actively assisted Epstein by recruiting, grooming, and facilitating the rape and abuse of underage victims, some as young as 14.

However, despite the indictment, the investigation, and Maxwell’s conviction, Epstein’s 2019 suicide while in jail left many questions unanswered.

This is at the core of the media coverage the world is seeing today. His death meant that victims and the public were robbed of any true retribution. Furthermore, with the passage of the Epstein Files Transparency Act in November of 2025, which led to the release of the Epstein documents, questions are resurfacing, and new ones are arising. It seems that every day, the full picture keeps getting more blurry. Who knew what, who participated, and who was protected is all becoming more and more confusing.

The release of the files, as well as the controversy around their redactions and the ones that have not been released, has revealed that Epstein’s crimes and network were much greater than ever thought. Moreover, the importance of the alleged parties involved is far greater than anyone could have ever imagined. Politicians. Royalty. Financiers. Media figures. People whose decisions impact economies and governments. This adds a layer of concern and outrage to the issue of a lack of retribution.

The contrast with certain European responses is instructive. In the United Kingdom, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, the former Prince Andrew, relinquished his Duke of York title and other honors when the news that he was tied to Epstein was made public. The former Prince was also stripped of any remaining titles and evicted from his royal residence by King Charles III. Across Europe more broadly, the release of the Epstein files by the U.S. Department of Justice prompted further institutional action. Børge Brende, President and CEO of the World Economic Forum, resigned in February 2026 following a review into his documented contacts with Epstein. While neither case resulted in a criminal conviction, both produced clear and tangible consequences. The Epstein files have implicated individuals at comparable levels of power within the United States, yet the institutional consequences have been, at the time of writing, far less consistent.

For ordinary people, this is where the case becomes unfathomable. Most of us understand crime at a human scale: greed, rage, desperation, or even pure evil. But the world in which Epstein's crimes happened doesn't align with the one most people live in. The deliberate, systematic exploitation, abuse, and rape of children, conducted alongside philanthropy, dinner parties, and flights with heads of state, are not something most people can imagine. We want to believe that evil at this scale would be visible, that it would announce itself. But it didn't; these crimes, visible and known by so many, remained hidden from the masses. These evil acts went on unpunished for decades. This is why people can’t let it rest, and also why many choose to turn away from the case. Some truly believe that those who need to be punished already have been, because nothing this awful could go unnoticed. Others aren't in denial at all. They simply don't see anything wrong with it.

In a time of deep political divisions and declining trust in institutions, the reemergence of the Epstein case amplifies these feelings. Even though the acts carried out by Epstein and his co-conspirators are clearly morally and legally wrong, our current political climate has turned the case into another showdown between parties.

Depending on where you sit politically, the case is either proof of corrupt liberal elites or evidence of conservative cover-ups. Each party has selected its villains, constructed its narrative, and neither side shows much interest in the version of the story that doesn't confirm what they already believe. This is worth acknowledging, not because it invalidates the anger, but because it gets in the way of accountability. It is also important to understand that what distinguishes this case from other politically charged legal matters is not the politicization itself, but the scope of who is implicated. The breadth of those who have been alleged to have participated in or known about Epstein’s crimes makes the partisan framing not only unhelpful, but a distortion of the available evidence—individuals connected to Epstein appear across both major political parties, multiple governments, and virtually every sector of institutional power.

When a case this serious gets absorbed into the political war, the actual questions, who was protected, how institutions failed, and whether anyone else will face consequences, get buried under the noise. While everything *is* political, the facts of what Epstein did, and who enabled him, are serious enough to stand on their own without political debates.

The past decade has turned politics into a melodramatic drama that has caused us to label things as good or bad, people as heroes or villains. But it is important to remember that reality is more complex than that and, concerning the Epstein case, it requires the public to acknowledge those complexities. Because, at the end of the day, while we (the public) deserve answers, those most deserving of accountability are the victims. When we choose conflict over uncovering the truth, we make it about everything other than that. These cases, while political, require us to put aside differences and honor those who've been hurt.

Social media loves to throw things in our faces, forcing polarization. However, when the information we consume is unverified, it becomes harder to differentiate between facts, assumptions, and conspiracy theories. While it is important to question whether allegations could be facts, especially in this case, it becomes an issue when allegations are discussed as absolute truths.

I encourage you to ask questions, stay inquisitive about what is shown to you, but I also encourage you to get your information from reputable, verified sources. Most importantly, I ask that you stay mindful of those who suffered the most from the Epstein case, the victims.

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STOP MAKING ABUSE ~~POLITICAL~~.

~ Mia Vaccarella

With the recent release of the Epstein files, containing more than three million pages, much of the news coverage has focused on what is being called a "political scandal." Headlines debate which side of the political spectrum contains more of Epstein's associates, while public conversation has turned into a game of partisan point-scoring. Epstein was conspiring with wealthy elites who hold tremendous influence over our government and society. While the files provide answers to the mysteries of the rich and powerful, they are, more importantly, the stories of thousands of victims. The documents detail a long history of sexual violence. Yet, the fact that these crimes were about the systematic abuse of young girls is becoming lost in political arguments.

Epstein's network thrived because their wealth enabled impunity. Law enforcement failures, political connections, and institutional silence allowed abuse to persist for years. Headlines promise intrigue, but rarely emphasize the enduring consequences for survivors, or the structural failures that made the abuse possible. With every mention of Trump's name is the question of "...but what about the Clintons?" And vice versa.

Of course, we should be demanding accountability from everyone involved, from the direct perpetrators to the enablers who allowed the crimes to continue. However, we should also center survivors in the pursuit of justice, rather than redirecting the conversation into partisanship. In this process, the women and girls who suffered remain invisible in the justice system, yet their information has been exposed through the Department of Justice's poor redaction efforts.

While this misframing of abuse is most recent and visible with the Epstein files, it is certainly not the only example. Over the past few years, the manosphere—an online space where toxic masculinity is celebrated—has infiltrated the screens of young boys. What was once treated as offensive "jokes" about sexual violence has escalated into a disturbing celebration of abuse.

Andrew Tate, a former kickboxer turned social media personality, has become a central figure in this ecosystem. With millions of followers across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, Tate promotes a lifestyle built on domination and a casual celebration of sexual violence.

Many young boys consume his content daily, absorbing the idea that abuse and coercion are integral aspects of masculinity. Tate and his brother are currently facing rape and human trafficking charges, yet he is still considered a "role model" and "relatable" to young men.

Nick Fuentes, an extreme-right political commentator, has used similar violent rhetoric as a political talking point. Most notable, in my opinion, was when he publicly stated on his live stream show "America First" that "a lot of women want to be raped." It seems that society has moved past rape jokes, as if they weren't bad enough. The type of speech used by Tate and Fuentes suggests that these are not just jokes about sexual violence, they are a just reality. So now, we have Fuentes whose statements treat sexual violence as a desired outcome to serve a political agenda.

Even in mainstream political commentary, we see this impulse to minimize abuse. In response to the Department of Justice's delay in releasing the files, Scott Jennings—a political commentator for CNN—said they "should follow the law" but also "let's not get our knickers in a twist."

It is as if the systematic sexual abuse of minors and the government's subsequent failure to follow the law about it is not a big deal at all. It is as if the outrage at sexual violence and our own government's complicity in it is excessive.

This dismissal is especially grotesque given the content of the Epstein files. We are not talking about vague allegations. We are witnessing emails, photographs, and videos that detail acts of violence most cannot fathom. The files contain graphic detail of the cruelty inflicted upon women and children, as well as a system in which powerful adults and public figures acted confidently, believing they would never face consequences. Now, the attitudes of those downplaying this suggest that any repercussions will remain just as unlikely as the perpetrators intended.

Psychologist Mary Pipher puts it bluntly: "Young men need to be socialized in such a way that rape is as unthinkable to them as cannibalism." And yet, we live in a culture where abuse is debated and weaponized politically. Epstein's crimes—and the crimes of all abusers—are not a scandal to be litigated between parties. They were clear and illegal acts of violence.

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more like MOOMINVALLEY

by: iris lin

Deep in the heart of Moominvalley sits a large blue tower with a round, red turret. In it resides a family of round, hippo-like trolls with large snouts—the beloved creations of Finnish-Swedish author and illustrator Tove Jansson, brought to life in her whimsical comics and novels published between the 1940s and 1970s.

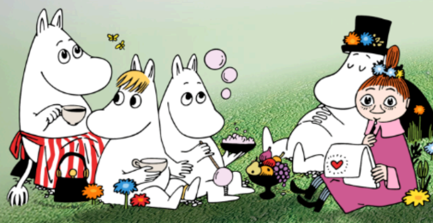
In their daily adventures, the Moomins and their friends encounter all sorts of magic, welcoming newcomers along the way. Through the floods in *Comet in Moominland*, to the long winter solitude in *Moominland Midwinter*, there is a steady theme running through these cherished stories. Everyone is welcome in Moominvalley. Moominmamma regularly opens the tower's doors to strangers creatures from near and far alike, never questioning why they have come or how long they plan to stay.

From the adoption of timid, pointy-eared Sniff into the family to the arrival of the little twin creatures Thingumy and Bob, the family never hesitates to pull out extra beds for their guests. This creates a safe environment and refuge where acceptance is first and foremost. Even creatures who don't quite fit in, like those who are shy, misunderstood, or lost, are welcomed with open arms by the Moomins and their friends. Moomintower is not a house, but a home and a safe place for all, despite where they come from.

The characters in these stories evoke a sense of belonging in the reader and a feeling of comfort through the unwavering acceptance Jansson's stories offer. Her novels have a quiet allegory; the characters show that community is strongest when there is openness and embrace.

Moominvalley is not a place without conflict or fear, but it is a place where love and compassion are so freely given and where there is always room at the table for one more.

In a world so divided by fear, confusion and differences, we should all try to create a more welcoming environment, one that is similar to the large blue tower house with a round, red turret.

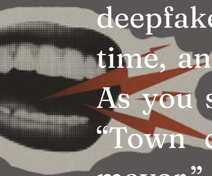


3d art by Kuutti Siitonen

FAKE NEWS
FAKE NEWS
FAKE NEWS

BEYOND THE REEL

BY: ATHENA CARUSO



“I can’t believe this!” says the message attached to an Instagram reel of a dog doing the Macarena on the wing of an airplane. It was, of course, sent by your mother. After laughing to yourself about her gullibility, you explain the concept of an AI deepfake to her for what feels like the hundredth time, and return to scrolling through your feed. As you scroll, you come across a reel that says, “Town crime rates increase 200% under new mayor.” Two hundred percent? What a terrible mayor. It sounds catastrophic. A number like that is bound to spark public outrage and backlash. Thoughts of disapproval are spiraling through your head, and the comments share the same attitude, but you all overlooked the fact that numbers don’t just exist without context. It turns out the reel failed to mention that the town recorded one crime last year, and recorded three this year. Technically, going from one to three is a 200% increase, but now that you know the full picture, do you still think a two-crime increase constitutes backlash and outrage? In the digital age, we are constantly faced with deception. While spotting obvious false content online (like an AI dancing dog) may make you feel media savvy, it’s easy to overlook incomplete and manipulative information that can do real harm. In an online world built on engagement and reactions, questioning the information you consume is key to achieving media literacy.

Not all media deception is created equal. The first category of media deception is AI deepfakes. Deepfakes can replicate any person, place, or thing, creating realistic video and audio clips from just a written prompt. Some of these deepfakes are easy to catch. However, as AI advances, the quality of these deepfakes improves, making it harder to tell fabrication from reality. The next deceptive category is disinformation. Disinformation is false or misleading information shared to deceive viewers. This type of content isn’t always blatantly false; it typically shows up in posts through a lack of context that exaggerates or makes something appear more extreme. It’s important to note that not all faulty information is shared with fraudulent intent. The sharing of false information unknowingly is called misinformation. For example, a friend tells you about a new study they saw that said energy drinks cause permanent memory loss, but after looking into it, you find that the study was done on rats, not humans. Your friend wasn’t intentionally lying to you; they were just misinformed. Understanding the different categories of false information is a huge help in identifying fabricated content.

The extreme amounts of deceptive and false content online make it feel like you have to walk on eggshells to avoid getting fooled, but why is there so much distorted information? One reason is because there are people who use online platforms to promote their viewpoint on a subject or issue, in hopes of gaining support from viewers. Companies, activists, and political figures all strive to shape public opinion, gain power, and/or sell products. Many of them achieve these goals by pushing their narrative through deceitful and misleading content to get viewers to support their agenda. Although this explains why deceptive content is constantly posted, there’s actually another underlying reason for the constant presence of malicious information,

and it's the structure of social media algorithms. The number one priority of platforms like Instagram Reels is cultivating engagement. Engagement is driven by intense viewer reactions of fear, shock, and outrage, meaning that emotion lies at the base of the system. It's what drives people to interact with content, whether it's commenting, liking, reposting, or sharing a post. Your social media algorithms prioritize performance over truth because the system wasn't designed to keep you rightly informed; it was designed to keep you scrolling. Although those factors may be feeding us the deception, they can't be entirely put to blame for our gullibility. The human brain is wired to automatically accept information that aligns with our beliefs and values. This is called confirmation bias, and it can be very detrimental to our ability to identify false information. Our brains also process simple, bold information much more easily and quickly than longer explanations, a phenomenon called cognitive ease. It's tricky to become media literate when our brains are practically designed to succumb to deception, but knowing a little bit about our inner workings can help you stay aware.

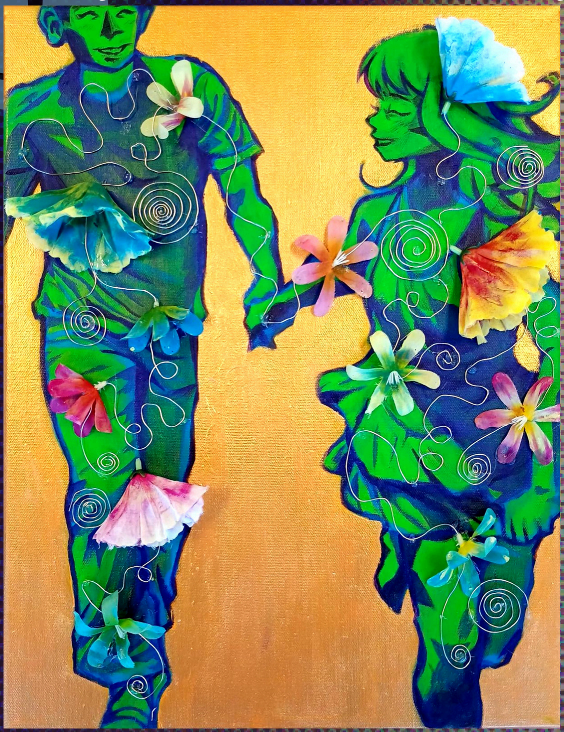
Various studies have proven that many adults in the U.S. use social media as their prime news source. While social media can offer some valuable information about world happenings, your ability to truly know what's going on is weakened if you don't have the media literacy skills to determine the truth.

Here are some steps you can take to stay aware and improve your media literacy. First, pause before reacting. If you see something on social media that seems absolutely preposterous, chances are it isn't what it seems. Before you let your emotions take over, question the post. What is it missing? Is it missing numbers, dates, people, or other details that could completely change the meaning of the information? If you realize that the post is missing context, look it up on a reputable news source. Chances are, the post has rearranged the facts to steer your perception and evoke an emotional response. So maybe the start of achieving media literacy is explaining an AI-dancing dog to your mom. After all, learning to see beyond the reel is when you begin to achieve full awareness.

FAKE
Lies. Lies. Lies.
News.
Fake.
Lies. Lies. Lies. Lies.
FAKE!

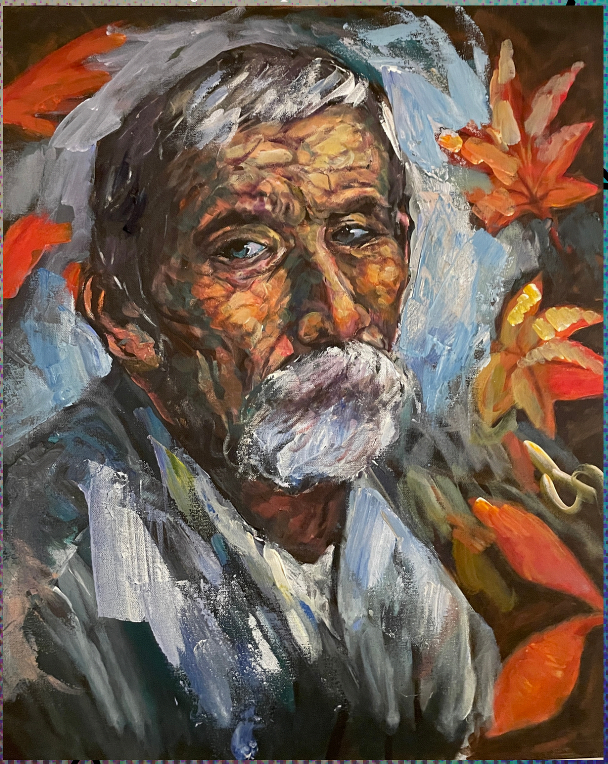
ART SUBMISSIONS

If Only These Bodies Didn't Get in the Way

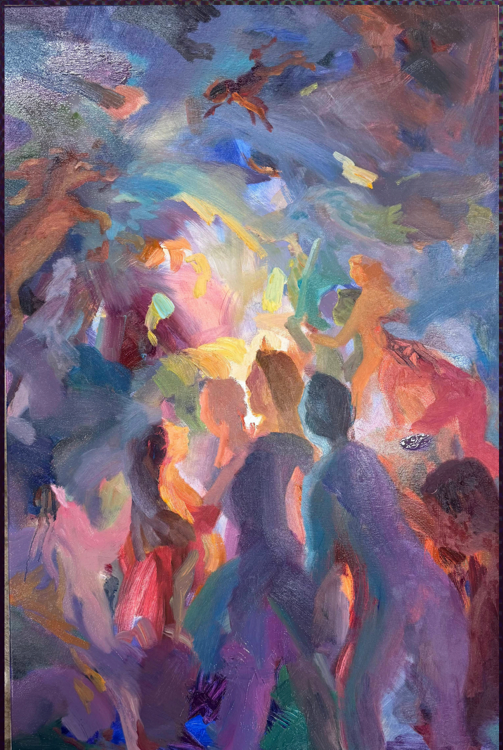


By: Xael Leon

By: Joseph Zhai

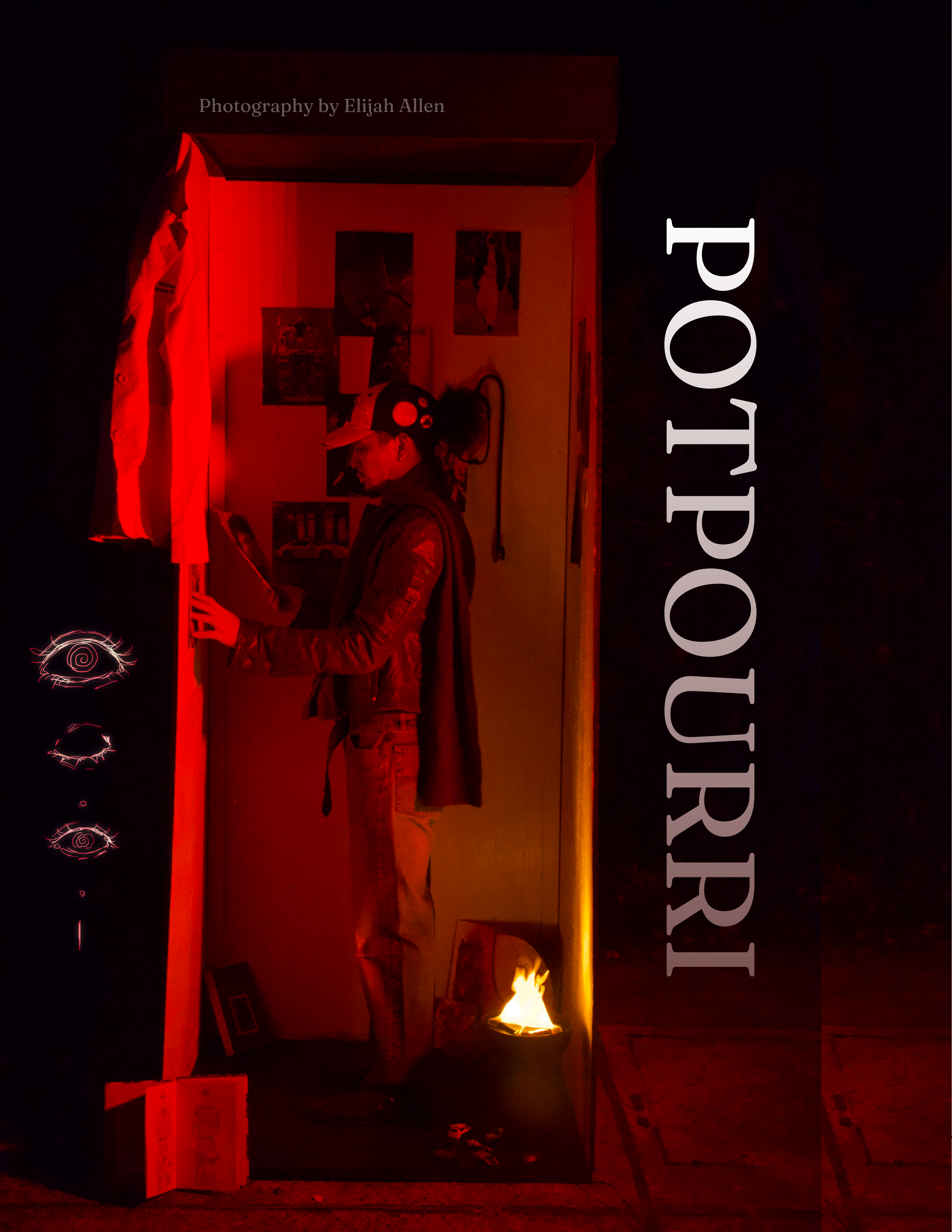


By: Zhanjiang Zhang

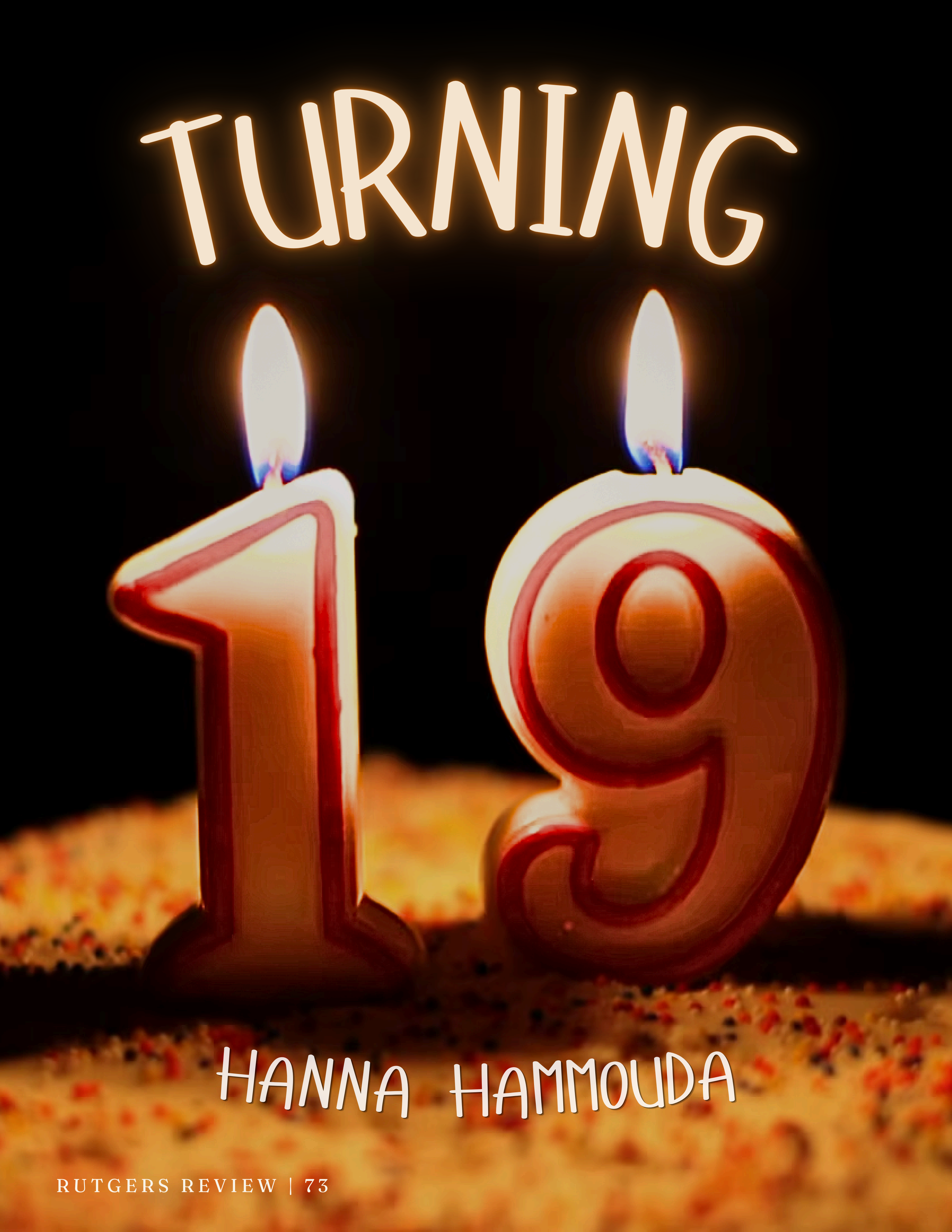


POTPOURRI

Photography by Elijah Allen



TURNING 19



HANNA HAMMOUDA

This past November was my 19th birthday, and ever since then, I've felt off. This particular birthday was strange because from weeks before, I had already determined that this birthday was definitely not going to be one for the books. I somehow already knew that I was likely going to spend it sulking and crying for what felt like absolutely no reason. Lo and behold, this is exactly what happened.

Some of you might be blaming me for this. After all, I didn't even give myself a chance. How did I even come to the conclusion that this birthday would be like this?

It's because it was my 19th birthday.

19 seems to be the age that nobody can get right. Your accomplishments aren't accomplishments, and that's because your accomplishments don't even start out as goals to begin with. They start as things that need to happen, right there, right now, or you're a failure. Then, when it finally does happen, a completely separate issue consumes you, and you don't even get a moment to be proud of what you achieved. In fact, 19-year-olds don't have "achievements" or "goals". What we have is a never ending game of catch up, ultimately leaving us unsatisfied with ourselves every single time.

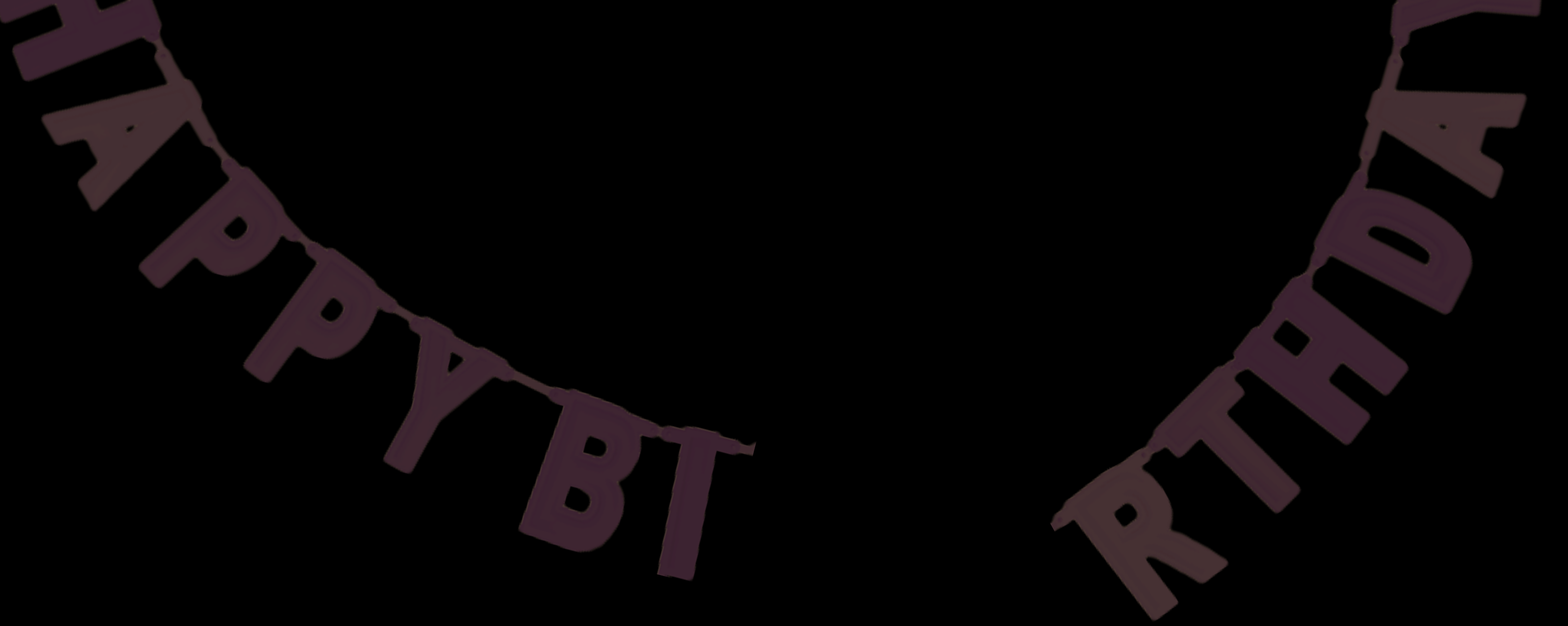
When I turned 19, it was the first time in my life where on my birthday, I was ashamed to say the age I was turning. Not because it "sounded old", but rather I felt that the age that I said didn't match where I actually was in life...

"Yes, I'm 19. Yes, I still live at home. I'm in the same place I was 4, 5, 6 years ago. I still don't feel like an adult, even though I was actually supposed to come to terms with that last year, so I'm behind on that as well. Yes, college is weird, but not the sudden-independence-and-gaining-new-experiences weird that all my peers are experiencing; It's the I-feel-stuck-and-I-never-seem-to-have-enough-money weird." It was almost paradoxical.

With that being said, my 19th birthday was uneventful. I spent most of the day at home. Then I felt shitty about spending my birthday at home, so to combat this I went to Trader Joes and spent $50 on stuff I didn't need, using the excuse of it being my birthday to justify it. I then went home and wallowed in my own self pity.

The day after, I went to campus and met up with a friend as we were both walking to our class. She wished me a belated birthday because she didn't know it was my birthday yesterday, due to the fact that I didn't post about it myself. This was fair considering the only form of contact we have with each other is Instagram, and we had just met that year. When she asked me how my birthday was, I told her honestly that I didn't do much. I could feel everything starting to come back up again; the self-pity, the fear of being judged, the dread of an awkward silence between us...

"Birthdays aren't what they used to be!" she ended up replying while laughing. She went on to say that her and her friends tried to plan



something for her birthday this past summer, but because all of them were so busy, the plans fell through. She said it with such genuine humor and acceptance for the situation, and I couldn't help but be comforted about my situation.

19 is strange. It's the final year of adolescence, and we cling onto it for dear life, wanting to bask in it as long as we can, ultimately making it what one could call the "teenagiest" of the teenage years. As Kylie Jenner put it, 19 is a year of "realizing things" - (I fear only real ones understand what she meant by this).

You realize that turning 20 doesn't mean your life is over, as much as the internet loves to make it seem like it is.

You realize that you don't have to force a dramatic change in your life in order for you to feel worthy of it. And most importantly, you realize that you don't have to cry like a baby on your birthday anymore....

Why?

Because you're 19.

And you have way better things to do than worry about your birthday.

Japanese Brisket Sandwich

By: Hanna Hammouda

Another fight means another night spent at the bar to avoid the stinging silence that has become so ordinary at the house.

Growing up, I witnessed all my friends and family get into relationships before me. I was envious of them; couples who touched each other at every moment just because they could, because the other person was theirs to touch. Couples who brought each other up incessantly, and even when they were silent, the most oblivious person could tell that they were still thinking about the other.

It was sickening. The people I knew were so unfamiliar with independence, where for me it's all I've ever known. It was just who I was, and it would never change.

But then I met her.

I was 27 and had given up hope. I figured my destiny was to be one of those old bachelors who become an inside joke with the baristas at a local coffee shop for conversing with them so much out of pure desperation.

When Vanessa and I got married, I had a steady job, a full head of hair, and goals. I did the thing that I thought would never happen: I had found someone. So I felt invincible. In my romantic life, in my career, in everything.

That was the last time I felt ambition of any sort. It's six years later, and I don't even recognize myself anymore. I got laid off two weeks ago, and I'm too ashamed to carry on speaking to her or figure out a plan for our future. How could I? Failure surrounds me like sharks.

To distract myself from the quandary of my life, I've now been immersing myself in the lives of others.

A group of 20-something-year-old women plop themselves in a booth behind me while heartily laughing. Perfect. I ordered my third Rum and Coke of the night and fixed my position on the stool; they were going to be the next victims of my eavesdropping (as you can see, unemployment has been great for me.)

"Work has been horrible…" one woman states. She has shoulder-length black hair and a septum piercing she probably takes on and off to stay professional in the daytime.

"I can drink to that!" another woman replies as she holds up her vodka martini. Blondes have more fun. And by more fun, in this case, it's taking any opportunity to get wasted.

"Didn't you just start this job, though?" the third girl asks. She has an abundant amount of freckles on her face and long, russet brown hair. She actually looks a lot like Vanessa…not helping my period of moping.

Septum Piercing starts again. "It's just the exact same thing as my last job, only with better pay. I'm just so done with corporate! I feel like I'm wasting my life…"

Well, maybe if Septum Piercing was fired from this job she despises so much, it'd be a different story. Then she'd really feel like she was wasting her life…

> ***"I was ready to give the entire golden sandwich to her."***

Blondie gives Septum Piercing a reality check: "If I had your job and made your salary, my life would not be wasted, I'll tell you that. The tanning salon business isn't prosperous, you know."

"Yeah, and not much better with the restaurant industry! I spent my whole paycheck on that Japanese brisket sandwich tonight." Freckles complains.

I turned my head back so quickly that I almost blew my cover. The Japanese Brisket Sandwich? From Pavo's?

“It was totally worth it, though. I would order that sandwich in every life.” Septum Piercing raves.

It was exactly as I thought. No wonder it’s still being served after all these years! I was immediately thrown back a decade.

I was so utterly infatuated with Vanessa even though we'd only ever had one conversation where I pleaded (in the most laid-back way possible, of course) for her to go on a date with me. She agreed. I couldn’t believe it. So much so, I actually asked her “Really?” How was I even a real person...

So there we were. Me, sweating straight through the button-up I had bought three hours before, and her, probably wondering what my deal was. She got the Santa Fe Chicken Salad, and I got the Japanese Brisket Sandwich.

It’s a great feeling knowing you picked the right thing at a restaurant. I knew the salad she ordered wasn’t giving a fraction of the exhilarating experience this sandwich was providing me. When you love someone, the desire to share your moments of joy is so intense. You need them to feel what you feel. The idea of them not being happy when you are is unacceptable. I knew I had to do something.

After 5 minutes of exhaustingly polite back and forths, me essentially peer pressuring her to have a bite of the godly sandwich, and her repeatedly stating “I’m good, really!”, she finally tried it. When she took her first bite, she blurted out, “This is so much better than whatever the fuck I ordered...”

It was overwhelming how perfect she was. Though she politely refused, I was ready to give the entire sandwich to her, and even buy her fifteen more if she so pleased.

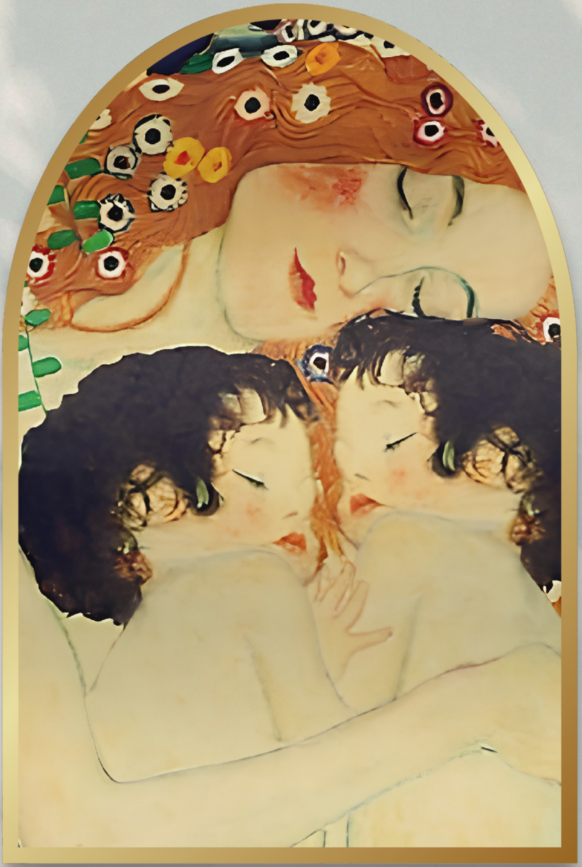
Her humor was perfectly tailored to mine, and every word she spoke was melodic. It was almost a cruel joke, how we had only found each other now, after I’d spent the last 27 years alone. The instant that she wasn’t speaking I craved her voice again. I now understood the couples who spent every waking moment thinking about each other. It was love, but even that seems like too lukewarm of a statement.

All of a sudden, I was ripped back into the present. Septum, Blondie, and Freckles all cheered their drinks. I was nauseous with regret. Vanessa was at home and I had spent the night listening to these women who meant absolutely nothing to me.

This was the woman who has come up in all my conversations since the day I met her. The woman whom I could spend eternity gazing into her eyes, thinking of thousands of new things about her that made her so unimaginably beautiful. And she was alone. She was at home, alone, likely questioning our relationship and my abilities as a husband. And I was here, people-watching at a bar, stuck in this moment of self-inflicted disillusionment, while the woman I love waits for me to be the man I once promised I’d be.

A Mother's Most Valuable Gift

Saketh Karri



The baby's cry fills the room,
quieted quickly by a lullaby.
Skin to skin makes flowers bloom
and both let out a content sigh.

Her first word is a quiet one
and steps were soon to follow.
Her childhood is almost done,
but their hearts are anything but hollow.

Her baby is now no longer her own,
they soon begin to drift.
Mistakes were made, truths were shown,
and between them now is a rift.

Years go by with little said,
no longer looking at one another.
They are now strangers, emotions unread,
no longer a child and her mother.

But then something changes and eye meets eye,
A forgiving expression on her mother's face.
A fresh new start, they want to try,
and the baby is once again in her mother's embrace.

چوڑیاں
BANGLES

JAVERIA JAMAL

The newest trend has swept through the internet, and I know it will be short-lived but 'buddah-bangles' echoes through my mind. I never felt the urge to wear churiye outside of weddings–who would? They're for occasions. But I bought a set nonetheless and, still, I want to rummage through the depths of Mama's closet– not for all of them, just a few. Maybe the jhumka churiye–those are unique, more ornate and lavish than 'buddah-bangles'–they'll catch people's eyes. The thick band with ornately placed jewels and jhumkies dangling from the bottom.

I see non-desi girls wearing gold bangles, the sound echoing in the classroom as they reach for their notebooks. I say to myself *my culture is not your costume*, but I don't really mean it. It's more a joke I'm telling myself that I'll later recount to my sister than actual disdain or frustration.

Except, deep inside I do mean it. I just don't think I should.

How could I when I've spent all of two weeks of my twenty-years in Pakistan? When my 'mother tongue' is more of an estranged-aunt? When what is supposed to sound like beautiful prose, even the simplest of sentences, comes out warbled and mangled?

So I wear my jhumkies and adjust my hijab endlessly so that they can peek out, and I wear my churiye to class and yet I cringe at the beautiful jingle they let out as I write, and I avoid at all costs speaking the language I try so hard to learn. I only allow myself to intersperse words rehearsed over the years. 'Kapre' instead of 'clothes', 'pani' instead of 'water' but never 'window' because I can't pronounce the rolled 'r.' I'll hurt my ears wearing bigger and bigger jhumkies, and hold still my churiye to quiet their song.

Get your plans out of the group chat TODAY.

By Lily Barber

Ok, let's be honest, we all have plans that are never going to leave the group chat. We all have that friend group that wants to go on a *Mamma Mia*-themed trip to Greece or constantly shares Instagram Reels of things to try in Tokyo Disneyland. These trips are not out of the question; there is always a possibility that you will all come together and commit to the bit. But, there is a collective understanding that you know life will get in the way, or the trips will be too expensive.

I implore you, be the reason plans leave the group chat.

In one of my hometown friend groups, our group chat dream was to visit each other's colleges. We wanted to see the settings of each other's stories, try their dining hall food, and meet the key players in each other's lives. While we talked about this idea a lot, I never really thought we would commit to the bit.

Last October, though, it actually happened. We had been talking about this trip for over a year, but something always got in the way. But this time, one of us proposed the second weekend of October, and no one had anything planned. It wasn't a long weekend, so we wouldn't be able to spend that much time together, but we were all available.

This is normally where plans fall through. The person who offers to drive backs out, something comes up at the last minute, or the idea is just generally forgotten about. But all four of us kept the conversation going. We all made a plan, and as it got closer, Paige bought a train ticket to get to Rutgers, and it all became real.

The plan was simple: Paige, Ellie, and I would all meet at Rutgers, and after introducing Paige to the wonders of Neilson Dining Hall, we would hit the road to meet our friend Chris at Bard College for the day. Paige would then spend one more night in New Brunswick and go back to their school in the morning for classes on Monday.

This extremely short road trip was the best part of my entire semester.

The drive up to Bard took around 2 hours, and by the time we got there, we were bouncing with excitement at the idea of all being together for the first time since July. The three of us waited in a random parking lot, and when we finally found Chris, we ran at each other like we were in a movie.

After dramatically reuniting, we spent the day exploring Bard. It was their Fall break, so we practically had the campus to ourselves. In the stories Chris told, I always imagined Bard as a magical school, a fictitious setting in Chris's stories, not one I would get to see for myself. And yet, there I was, surrounded by some of my favorite people, in a place that only existed in group chat messages before.

For the rest of the day, we explored the towns surrounding the college, ate outside at an amazing Greek restaurant, and explored a pop-up art gallery, all of which were unplanned.

After a couple of hours of simply enjoying each other's company, Chris spontaneously said, "You know what? I'll come back to New Brunswick with you." Chris took the initiative and set us up for the best night of the semester.

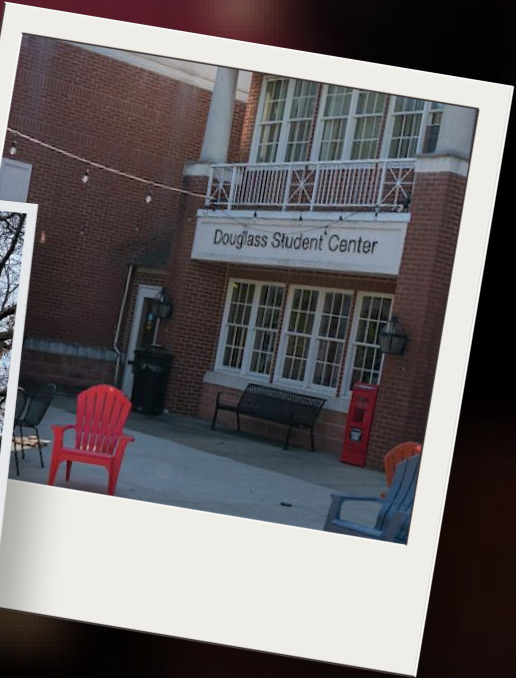
Before heading back to Rutgers, this time with one extra friend, we stopped for ice cream. And maybe it was the good company, or the excitement of another full day ahead with my favorite people, or maybe it was just good ice cream, but to this day, the ice cream I had at the random store near Bard College was the best I ever tasted.

Now, months later, I still see this campus through my high school friend's eyes. The Douglass Student Center's red lights will forever be known as the "evil student center." The booth we sat in for breakfast will always be our booth, even though we only sat in it for one meal. I'll be in my dorm doing homework and just look around, thinking, they were here. It brought a little bit of familiar magic to what had become my new ordinary at school.

If we had waited until the plans were perfect, we never would have gone on the trip. Within reason, we can't wait for a longer weekend, or a real guest room, or the perfect conditions. We have to seize the opportunity to be together; we just do not know how many other chances we will get.

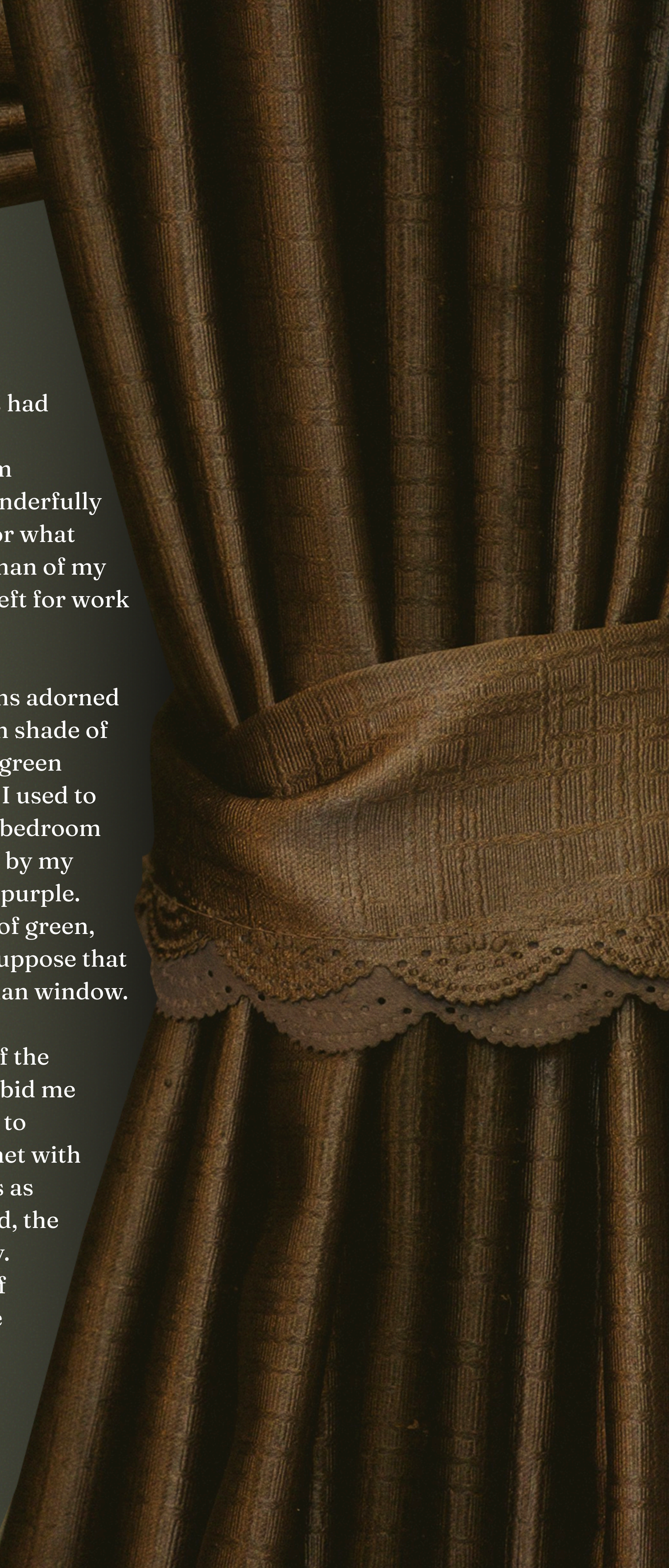
If you have plans that are collecting dust in your message history, be the reason they happen. While it can be scary to be the one to take the initiative, it is so important to stick to the plans that matter. Turn them into something realistic, something financially manageable, and be a leader in its creation. The long-lasting memories are worth the anxiety of sending the first text.

Bard
FOUNDED 1860



Windows

by Javeria Jamal



I always wanted a bay window when I was younger. In the master bedroom of my childhood home in Jersey City my parents had an ottoman placed in front of one of their windows. I suppose that's where the dream manifested–well, there and Rapunzel's wonderfully adorned casement. I would spend hours–or what felt like hours, at least–sitting on the ottoman of my parents' room, the room emptied as they left for work early in the morning.

I would push away the thick brown curtains adorned with dark green leaves–that was the fourth shade of green in that room alongside the emerald green tassel-tie back, sea green carpet and what I used to call 'puke green' colored walls. My shared bedroom right next door had purple walls as picked by my sisters but I never expressly loved pink or purple. My favorite color was always some shade of green, aquamarine, mint green and now sage–I suppose that also had to do with my hours by the ottoman window.

The view from the ottoman window was of the ever-grassy backyard that Baba would forbid me from entering while he cut the lawn. I was to remain at the front of the house lest I be met with a snake. I always watched from the swings as Baba turned the corner to cut the backyard, the sound of the mower fading ever so slightly. Perhaps the ottoman window was a sort of rebellious act on my part, a way to indulge myself as an explorer, cutting through the weeds and floating over the outdoor exhaust fans.

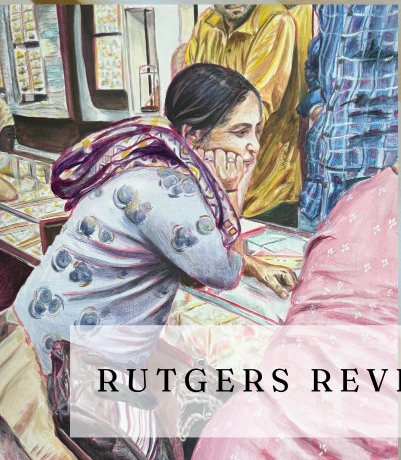
Alas, most of my time could not be spent by the ottoman window, though I would have loved it to be. My ottoman would be forfeited to Mama so she could sit down and pray, her back to the glorious view of the setting sun. No, most of my time was spent by the four consecutive windows at the front of the house–people watching: waiting for my parents' cars to park in the drive-way so I could run into their closet to scare them, watching as the NJ Transit trains swished by and covered my ears as the loud and sluggish cargo trains made their way. I’ve read the “Warning: screen will not stop child from falling out the window. Keep child away from window,” more times that I can count and imagined pulling myself back up with just one hand or valiantly saving our cat, Sheroo, from tumbling onto the hood of our car. I repeated these routines–rain or snow or shine, early mornings and late nights, as I waited for a new imaginary friend to introduce themselves.

Those four windows are where I stared out during commercials, where I watched the snow fall as I waited for the home-phone to ring and notify us of a snow day, where I crept to in the dead of night when sleep could not befall me and wait for Baba to carry me back to my room after he prayed Fajr.

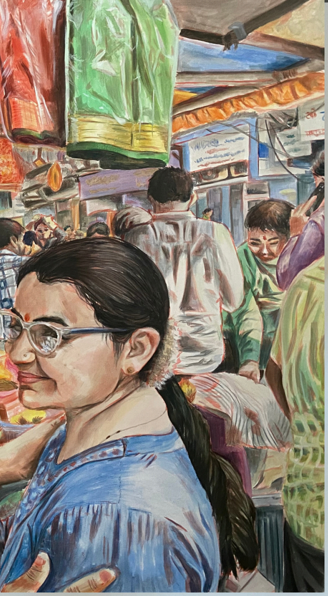
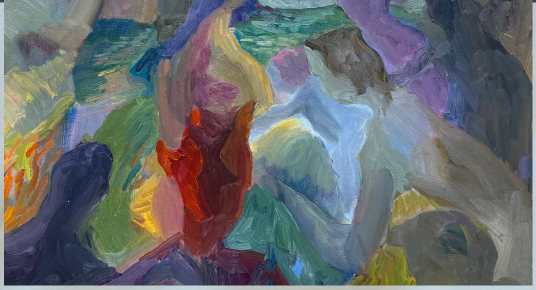
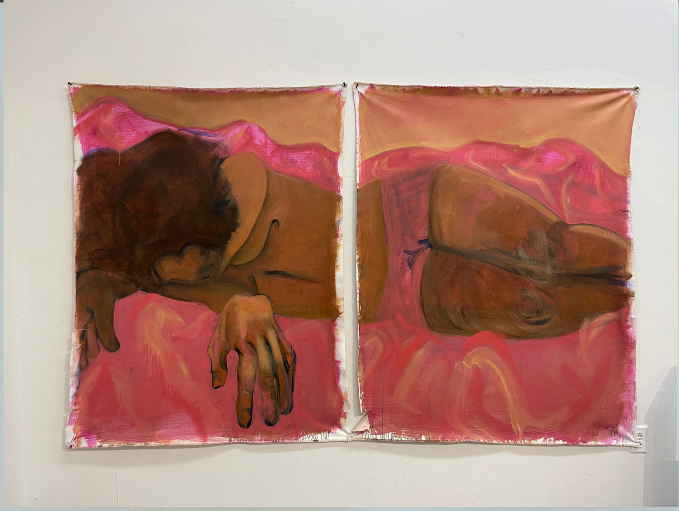
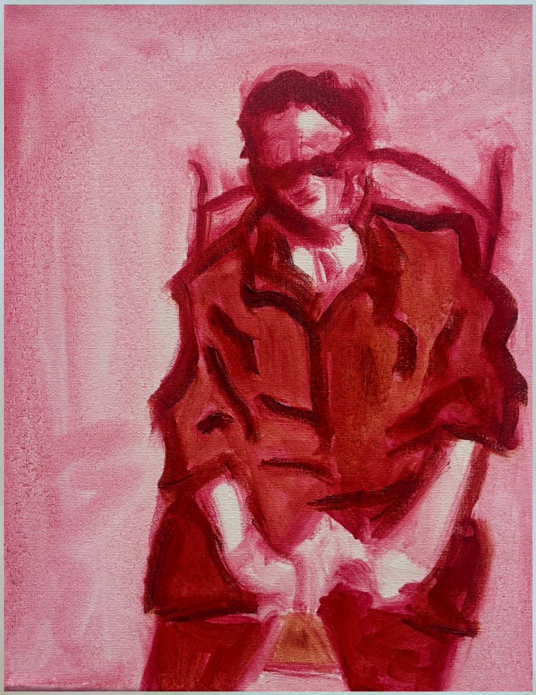
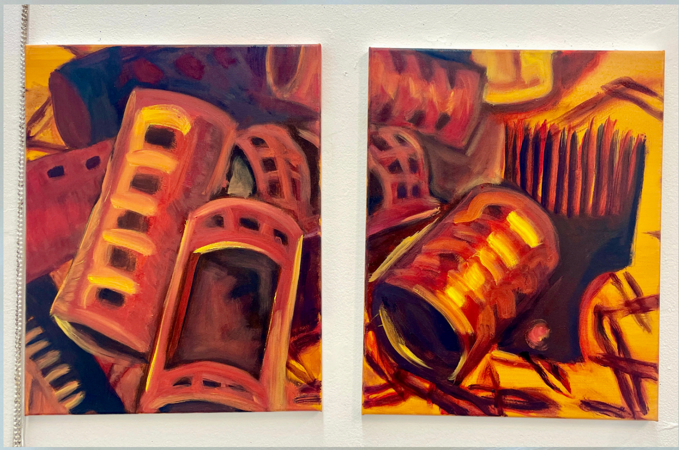
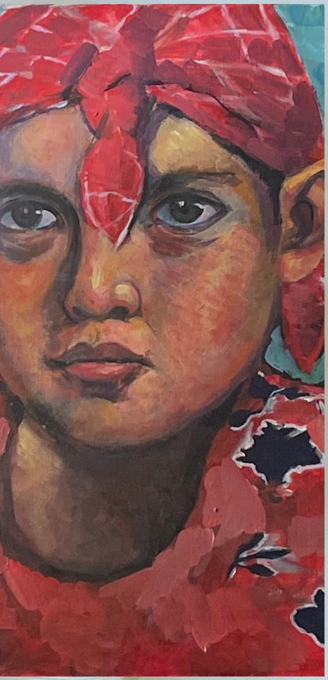
Now, in my new home, I have a bay window in my room–well it was my sister's but she moved out–for a bit–and now it's mine. My mom took a piece of foam and sewed a pink velvet cover onto it. When my sister had the room the bench was uninhabitable and unrecognizable, her many plushies taking it over. Now, it houses two cushions and a Kuromi plush my best friend gifted me for graduation.

When I look over to the left side of it, I can only picture my best friend sitting across from me. We sit there with our legs beside each other as we sit face-to-face, our backs pressed against the side of my bookshelves. We lift the lace curtains to watch for the pizza we ordered or to look at anyone suspiciously circling the end of the cul-de-sac.

With her I’m not imagining adventures, I’m reminiscing about them. We discuss disappointing finales, good books, advancements in our degrees, re-tell high school drama, confide our greatest secrets, talk politics and tell each other over and over he has to be the one. I’ve laughed at windows, cried at them, prayed towards them–and now I do that all with her.



Xael Leon - Rushiga Sarveiya

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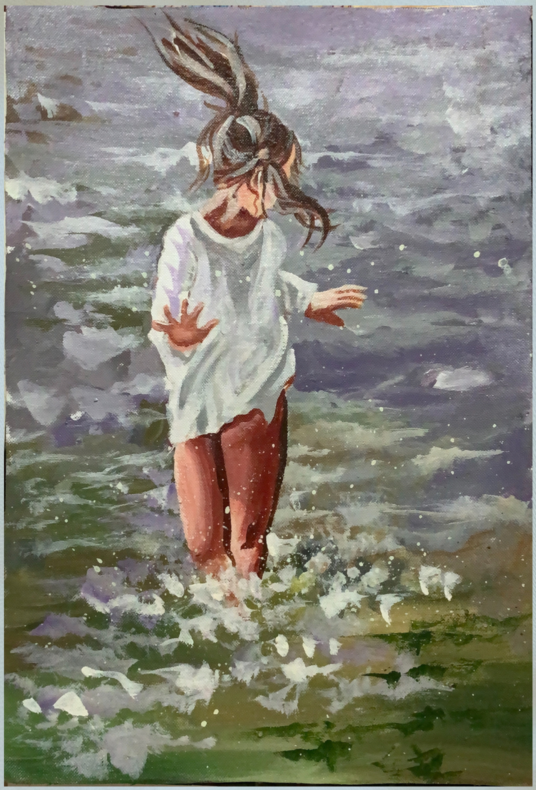
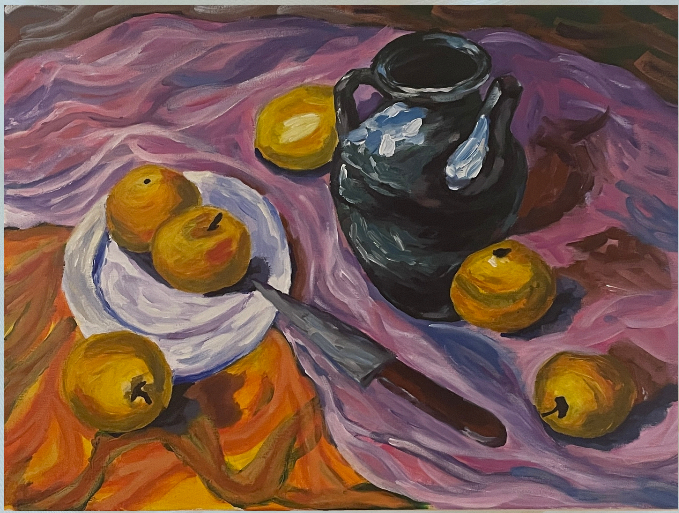
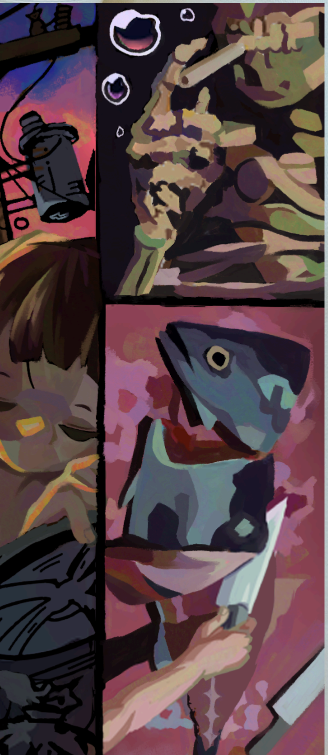
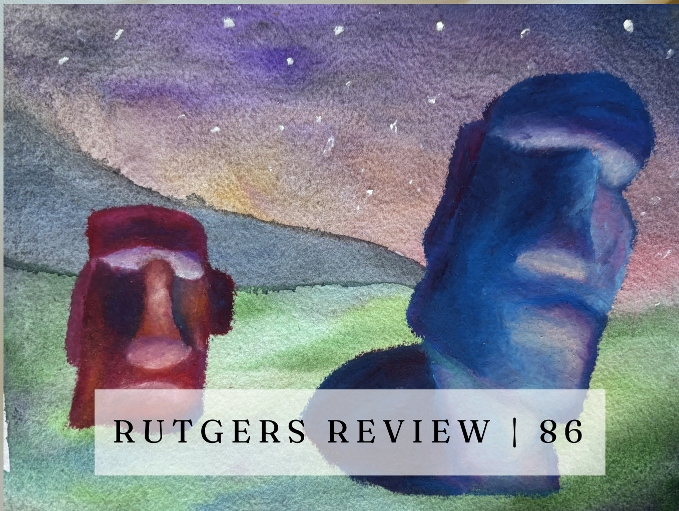
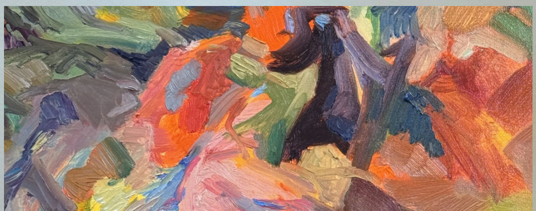

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